

# Gateways to Campus Culture: Exploring the Roles of Student Orientation Leaders

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*New student orientation is one of the places where the meanings of institutional cultural artifacts such as campus traditions, rituals, language, architecture, and other aspects of an institution's history are communicated. After visiting three public universities, the author discovered that while orientation directors were generally aware of the significance of cultural artifacts at their institutions, it was ultimately the student orientation leaders who passed on the meanings of these artifacts on to other students (both new students and new student orientation leaders). As part of a qualitative case study utilizing focus group interviews, the orientation leaders identified formal and informal ways in which they communicate the meanings of cultural artifacts to new students.*

## Overview of Cultural Artifacts

Trying to discover an institution's culture as an outsider is a difficult task (Kuh, 2009), but nearly all colleges and universities have characteristic cultural artifacts that are identifiable in helping one learn more about a college's culture (Strange & Banning, 2001). Some examples of cultural artifacts include the Golden Dome at the University of Notre Dame, the blue football field at Boise State University, the purple banners at New York University, the Ben Franklin statue on the college green at the University of Pennsylvania, and the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. Such artifacts are visible expressions of an institution's values and assumptions that contribute to an organization's culture (Schein, 2004; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Other artifacts on college campuses may include the lawn on a university quadrangle, historic Victorian style buildings, flags boldly waving school colors, statues of influential leaders, and students lining up in formation to walk to a football game or other high spirited athletic event. Such artifacts may convey important cultural meanings to members of a campus community (Manning, 2000); however, new students who are unfamiliar with the institution may have difficulty understanding the significance of these physical, verbal, and behavioral artifacts (Kuh, 2009; Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

While an institution's culture consists of various components, cultural artifacts are viable pieces of an organization that are recognizable to members of

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the campus community (Schein, 2004). Because they are recognizable, cultural artifacts provide researchers with an opportunity to explore a tangible component of an institution's culture. This is important since researchers have referred to institutional culture as invisible to its inhabitants (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988; Morgan, 2006). Cultural artifacts are also significant because they can be used to intentionally or unintentionally communicate messages about an institution's culture (Ott, 1989). Students may be familiar with cultural artifacts and their messages, even if they do not use the term "artifacts" to describe them. To gain insight into how students learn the meanings of cultural artifacts at their institutions, this study focused on the role of orientation leaders since these individuals are among the first points of contact for new students (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005).

## **Role of Orientation Leaders**

Orientation leaders can influence whether orientation is a successful experience for new students (Sawyer, 1988; Mullendore, 1992). Posner and Rosenberger (1997) point out that orientation leaders "can make a difference in how welcome students feel, how they respond to their anxieties, how much fun they have during the orientation, how well their questions are answered, and how much useful information is provided" (p. 47). As the first point of contact at orientation, these students typically lead activities such as campus tours, general overview of academic advising, and introduction to campus resources and support. While these activities may be clearly defined by respective orientation programs, the role of orientation leaders in communicating the meanings of cultural artifacts has not been previously studied or addressed in the student affairs literature.

The researcher visited three public universities in Fall 2007 and Fall 2008. Based on a review of the literature and informal interviews conducted with orientation directors, the researcher sought to gain insight into the orientation leaders' perceptions of their own roles in conveying cultural artifacts.

While individual orientation programs at institutions may vary, to become an orientation leader, a student must typically have completed at least one semester at the institution (NODA, 2007). There may be first-year students who become orientation leaders, but historically, sophomores are the ones who have developed active roles in the orientation experience. Mueller (1961) noted:

They are closer to their own experiences as freshmen, their sophistication in campus affairs is gloriously fresh and stimulating, and they will be eager listeners at the briefing sessions. No counselor can restrain the exuberant sophomore from giving too much advice to freshmen on careers, courses, dates, jobs, and anything else that is on his mind, but counselors must nevertheless always try, and try hard. (p. 224)

While others have a role in orientation programs, the relationship between freshmen and sophomores becomes a more natural fit for mentorship. Sophomore involvement as peer leaders in new student orientation is beneficial in helping first-

year students adjust to a new environment (Branch, Taylor, & Douglas, 2003). This mentor relationship between sophomores and first-year students ultimately was influential in the development of orientation leader programs. According to Sawyer (1988):

Orientation leaders must know and understand the standards and values expected of the orientation program. They must have excellent communication skills and knowledge about how the campus functions and what programs and services exist. They should be informed and committed ambassadors for the institutions and should reflect the diversity of their institution's student population. (p. 397)

## Research Methods

The researcher used a qualitative multiple case study design consisting of in-depth focus group interviews with orientation leaders, observations of orientation leader trainings, and document analysis (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). A qualitative software program was used to code and assist in the analysis of the data. The following research question guided data collection and analysis for this study: What perceptions do orientation leaders have of their role in communicating the meanings of cultural artifacts to first-year students at three public universities?

## Findings

The three groups of orientation leaders, upon examining their roles, described that they communicated the meanings of their institution's cultural artifacts to first-year students in the following four ways: 1) Serving as small group campus tour guides, 2) Sharing personal student experiences, 3) Speaking about artifacts with enthusiasm and honesty, and 4) Starting informal conversations with students. Despite differences in orientation programs at the three institutions in this study (such as organizational structure, personnel leadership style, and size), each group of orientation leaders in the focus groups identified those four ways when discussing their roles relative to the conversation of cultural artifacts.

### *Serving as small group campus tour guides*

All of the orientation programs studied offered small group campus tours ranging from one to three hours. According to the orientation leaders, these tours served as an opportunity for them to pass on the meanings of the institution's cultural artifacts to new students. Campus tours have been described as influential rituals in communicating an institution's values (Magolda, 2000; 2001). Although the orientation leaders did not describe the tours as rituals, they noted that the smaller group size of students during campus tours allowed the leaders more opportunities to point out prominent and historic buildings, talk about campus myths, discuss school traditions, introduce students to common language used

at their institutions, and describe other cultural artifacts at their institutions. The orientation leaders enjoyed sharing myths about their campuses throughout the tours. They believed new students would feel more relaxed and comfortable at orientation and remember the stories when walking through campus in the future. It was also important to the orientation leaders that they reserved the right to share these stories and add their own twists when giving tours to new students at orientation.

Based on the perspectives of the orientation leaders, orientation campus tours serve as tools to introduce students to the cultural artifacts of their new environment. Without the tours and the stories told along the way, buildings would be just buildings and nothing more. Students would pass by a statue of a prominent individual in the school's history and not realize its significance. While pointing out the bookstore, dining center, financial aid office, and academic advising center may have made students feel more comfortable, the orientation leaders acknowledged that the tours at orientation provided one of the first opportunities to begin communicating the meanings of cultural artifacts to students. Many of the orientation directors in this study agreed with the orientation leaders' views that campus tours were essential in this process.

### *Sharing personal student experiences*

Many of the orientation leaders identified sharing their personal experiences with new students as another way they communicated the meanings of their institution's cultural artifacts to new students. Personal experiences included the orientation leaders reflecting on their own orientation experiences, describing class experiences with particular professors, and talking about what it was like to live on or off campus. If the topics came up, orientation leaders also talked about participating in campus traditions or the meanings of words used by students. They indicated that these conversations could happen at any point throughout the orientation sessions, including campus tours, stemming from the small group atmosphere and long hours spent with the same people. Although discussing these experiences could happen informally, the orientation leaders indicated that this sharing was purposeful in their attempt to make new students feel welcomed and connected. Orientation leaders also noted the importance of using all encompassing language when working with new students. They felt that using language that was sensitive to all groups was part of their role in effectively communicating the meanings of artifacts to new students.

### *Speaking about campus with enthusiasm and honesty*

Orientation leaders identified enthusiasm and honesty as being an important part of their role in communicating the meanings of cultural artifacts to first-year students. Since cultural artifacts are visible expressions and sometimes provide the first glimpse into an institution's culture, orientation leaders felt it was important

to discuss them with excitement. They tried to be enthusiastic and honest to show new students how much they loved their institutions, even if this meant discussing an artifact with a negative connotation such as an offensive school mascot. Whether relaying their beloved campus traditions, fun-filled myths, or positive or negative background about the school's history, the orientation leaders at all three schools pointed to leading and sharing with enthusiasm and honesty as an important part of their roles. Some of the orientation leaders noted that it was important to continue to show enthusiasm to new students because of the influence on their impressions of the university, despite the drain of working long days and hours filled with countless activities that may not always work out as planned.

### *Starting informal but purposeful conversations with students*

According to the orientation leaders, another way that institutional traditions and rituals were shared during orientation was through informal but purposeful conversations with new students, mainly with small groups. Orientation leaders acknowledged it was their role to facilitate these discussions since they were familiar with the meanings of artifacts at their institutions.

For the most part, the orientation leaders thought that the meanings of artifacts were shared informally—not quite by accident, but not prearranged either. While the orientation leaders were instructed to cover particular details on the campus tours, some of which included addressing physical artifacts of the institution, they pointed to perceiving themselves as having a role in facilitating informal conversations with new students that referenced cultural artifacts. Orientation leaders felt it was part of their role to take the initiative and share personal experiences to help new students feel more comfortable while transitioning into the different environment.

## **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

Although one study cannot provide all of the insight into how orientation leaders perceive their role in communicating the meanings of cultural artifacts, the findings of this study suggest orientation leaders feel they do have a role in this process, even if it is an indirect one. The implications of this study are important to orientation units since new student orientation is one of the first opportunities for institutions to acculturate first-year students (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). Orientation directors must take advantage of this opportunity and recognize how they can help their orientation leaders incorporate the meanings of cultural artifacts into their new student orientation sessions. An intentional effort needs to be made to discuss the significance of artifacts in the orientation leader training sessions.

While the orientation leaders interviewed at the three campuses were able to identify specific ways in which they conveyed the meanings of artifacts, the

common response was that it happened informally. That is, particular orientation leaders influenced how the meanings of cultural artifacts were communicated to students. This finding leads to the issue of the training of orientation leaders. Establishing formal ways to communicate the meanings of cultural artifacts during small group sessions, such as campus tours, could ensure uniform communication and enhance interaction. Furthermore, orientation directors can make a conscious effort to incorporate more opportunities, other than campus tours, for the student leaders to share their experiences with first-year students to help them feel more welcome and comfortable at orientation sessions.

While the findings in this study cannot be generalized, it is important for orientation professionals such as coordinators and directors to be aware of the implications for practice and policy. Institutional history, influential individuals, campus traditions, symbols, and other artifacts should be communicated intentionally to new students. Previous research indicates that the greater a student's academic and social integration, the more connected he or she will be to the institution (Tinto, 1993). An orientation process which features both academic and social components is one means of effectively assisting the students this integration and helping them persist (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Efforts to communicate the significance of cultural artifacts, and discussing their meanings and importance with incoming students as part of new student orientation, would also promote a sense of campus affiliation, community building, and bonding between the students and institutions (Siegel, 2008). Physical, verbal, and behavioral artifacts and their significance to the institution can be highlighted intentionally through orientation leader guided campus tours or through informal conversations in the campus dining hall.

It is the responsibility of orientation personnel to address cultural artifacts during orientation leader training. If orientation directors are unfamiliar with the cultural artifacts at their institution, the researcher recommends they take a campus tour and meet with an institutional historian as a starting point in learning more about the significance of the institution's artifacts. Committees involved in activities that uphold campus traditions or school spirit can provide opportunities for orientation personnel to collaborate with other individuals on campus who may have unique or shared experiences with artifacts. These institutional artifacts can be incorporated into new student orientation procedures. Activities could include participating in campus traditions, appreciating the significance of historic buildings, reciting the words of a fight song, and wearing school colors. Other ways to accomplish this include identifying and communicating welcoming language, beliefs, rituals, norms, values, and behaviors that help introduce outsiders to a new culture, all of which are important steps for both institutional and departmental policies to help improve the orientation process (Schein, 2004).

While this study focused on orientation leaders and their roles in conveying cultural artifacts to new students at three public universities, further research on this phenomenon at other institutions, such as private institutions or community colleges, would provide valuable insight and add to the literature in the areas of orientation and higher education as a whole.

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