

Retention Principles for New Student Orientation Programs

Barbara A. Mann

New student orientation programs are effective retention strategies. It is important, however, that directors remember the basic tenets to ensure that success. This article reviews the need for a balanced program and suggests ways to develop student responsibility, to make the program attractive to students, to utilize faculty and staff members effectively, and to select and train well student orientation leaders. Observations on how to best utilize campus constituencies to provide a strong program for freshmen, transfers, and for parents will be highlighted.

New student orientation programs are too often viewed as either a testing and registration activity in the enrollment of students, or as the time when students participate in “fun and games” to the exclusion of academic concerns. Student affairs professionals working with new student orientation understand that orientation is not an “either/or” program, but a balanced introduction to the university, which recognizes the personal and individual needs of students as they enter a new environment. Orientation, as an event, brings together new students and the university to accomplish goals sought by both. New students have the opportunity to test the reality of the new situation while making new friends and completing registration for the first term. The university accomplishes major tasks in the matriculation of new students and has the opportunity to make known its expectations of students. New student orientation is a success when the goals of both groups are reached.

Retention studies (Beal & Noel, 1980; Lenning, Sauer & Beal, 1980; Terezini & Pascarella, 1980; and Tinto, 1975) point to the potential of new student orientation as a retention activity. Lenning et al. found significant improvements in retention rates by institutions that focused on orientation as a retention strategy. The “What Works In Student Retention?” (WWISR) study by Beal and Noel was designed to identify college and university programs which had a positive impact on student retention. The study found orientation programs targeted to reduce student attrition to rank third among the programs with high impact on retention. In addition, the exemplary retention programs highlighted in the study, because of their impact on retention, included several that were primarily orientation programs or orientation programs combined with other programs.

Lenning et al. (1980) found that certain strategies are implied in the research findings. Based on their findings,

Barbara A. Mann, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Higher Education at Florida State University.

(Reprinted from *Student Services: Enhancing Student Life (The Fourth Compendium)* by permission of The University of North Carolina General Administration)

The program should allow students and peers to interact and get to know one another and should provide informal interactions between faculty and students. In orientation programs warmth and friendliness should predominate, education and occupational goals and aspirations should be explored and assistance given to help clarify them, individual and group needs and expectations should be discussed, and a sense of caring should prevail (p. 36).

In addition to specific benefits of orientation as a retention activity, orientation can contribute to one of the characteristics which distinguishes the persisting from the non-persisting student. This feature is known as “student-institution fit” and is defined by Lenning (1980) as “moral and social integration, perceived responsiveness of the institution to student; needs, and the congruence between expectations and opportunities for their realization” (p. 3). Lenning et al. concluded that a good “student-institution fit” distinguished the persisting from the nonpersisting student. A summer orientation program is the first opportunity most new students have to test their fit with the institution.

The value of orientation as a retention activity, which promotes “student-institution fit,” should not be underestimated. New students perceive the new environment as hospitable when they discover they can make new friends, know what courses they will be taking in the fall, know who their instructors will be, know where they will be living, and have had a chance to meet some faculty members and to find their way around campus. After a summer orientation program, which provides this information, students return to the campus in August with anticipation, excitement, and a feeling of security, which is a direct result of the exposure to the new environment during orientation. The students then perceive a good fit with the institution.

Ten years of directing new student orientation programs led the author to the formulation of principles to guide the development of these programs. The principles are based on objective evaluations of the programs by the new students, verbal comments made by parents and students at the conclusion of the programs, comments obtained from upper-class students applying for student orientation leader positions, evaluations from faculty and staff members working with the orientation programs, and the author’s observations. The accumulated experiences of four subsequent years of coordinating student retention programs at the same institution reinforced the author’s views of the retention value of orientation programs. These retention principles for new student orientation programs are, therefore, a synthesis of experience - as both an orientation director and a retention coordinator — and the knowledge of research findings.

Creating a Balanced Program

The goals of the institution must be accomplished, but the student cannot be tested, advised and registered to the exclusion of all other activities. It is natural for new students to be apprehensive and anxious about unfamiliar surroundings and experiences, and these feelings must be addressed in the orientation program. Creating the opportunities in the orientation program for the new students to make new friends, to determine if their values are similar to those of their new classmates, and to discover the many new

academic, social and recreational activities available to them will relieve many unexpressed anxieties about their new academic and social environment. It is through these opportunities that new students test their “fit” with the institution.

An important corollary of the principle of a balanced program is that an institution can never impart to new students all the information they should have. Attempting to cover all the student services, a host of academically related programs such as band, chorus, and ROTC, opportunities for membership in student organizations, and all the institution’s rules and regulations from academic dishonesty to vehicle parking usually creates boredom in students at the first orientation program and students will not attend these meetings at subsequent programs as “the word gets around.” There are creative and interesting ways to expose new students to this information, such as information fairs, video-taped programs in the lobbies of residence halls housing the orientation students, skits by the student orientation leaders, and displays on bulletins boards in high-traffic areas during orientation. The student development staff may not be able to give new students all the information, but they can clearly state the institution’s expectations of students. A tone can be set that assures students that their questions will always be welcome and answered and that more specific information will be forthcoming when the academic year begins. In the process of setting this tone, the staff can make progress toward the goal of developing student responsibility.

Developing Student Responsibility

One of the most important things that students can learn from orientation is that faculty and staff members are willing to advise and assist, but that they, as students, are individually responsible for their own actions and for reading and following directions. It seems to be difficult for many students to develop the habit of reading instructions, catalogs, and student handbooks. At orientation some students are making independent academic and personal decisions for the first time. For the students who have difficulty with these activities, orientation is the place to start developing a sense of responsibility to compliment their developing sense of independence.

Offering Something of Value

Summer orientation programs seem to work well for different institutions by accomplishing the major tasks of advising, registration, and imparting needed information, but to attract new students to leave summer jobs for a few days and spend money on an orientation program, students must be offered something of value to them in return. The major attractions seem to be the opportunities to meet other students and make new friends, individual advising by a faculty member or other academic adviser, actual registration for classes, and the chance to be in the new environment for a few days. Orientation programs, which emphasize these advantages of attendance, seem to attract a high percentage of their incoming students at their summer programs.

Utilizing Effective Faculty and Staff Members

An institution may deem it important to have new students see and hear from administrators, deans, and others, but the people who are most effective with new students should spend the most time with them. Academic advisers, small group discussion leaders, and workshop facilitators should be faculty and staff members who work well with new students and who are caring people. Their job, in addition to getting students enrolled, is, by showing their concern and willingness to assist students, to start generating that feeling of a good “student-institution fit” which is so important in student retention.

Utilizing Upper-class Students

Upper-class student leadership should be utilized in every aspect of the orientation program. Upper-class students have an instant rapport and credibility with new students that many adults cannot achieve readily. New students believe they are getting the “real” information from upper-class students, even though faculty and staff members are giving the new students the same information. It is not unusual for new students to check information given to them by faculty and staff members with the upper-class students. Upper-class students are also effective in setting expectations for the new students-in conveying the differences between high school and college in the areas of academics, studying, and assuming responsibility for one’s actions, and in passing on school traditions.

Creating Effective Student Orientation Leaders

Effective student orientation leaders are the result of good recruiting, careful selection, effective training, and professional staff supervision. Some institutions have evolved a tradition of a volunteer corps of student orientation leaders; many others pay the students in the positions. Both can be effective because success with student orientation leaders depends more on their selection, training, and supervision than on their rate of pay. Personable and enthusiastic upper-class students do not come equipped with all the skills they need and must be taught how to lead small group discussions, how to distinguish their personal opinions from facts when responding to parents’ probing questions, how to advise as opposed to giving advice, and how to enforce residence hall policies and rules with new students away from home for the first time. Orientation leaders are eager to learn and are effective in every activity from checking the new students into the residence hall to serving with a faculty member as an academic advising team.

A corollary of this principle is that student orientation leaders should have personal growth and leadership development experiences as a result of serving in the position. Students who have served as orientation leaders over the years have indicated that the greatest benefits they found from being in the position were the development of their ability to speak to large numbers of people, the understanding they gained of how the university works, the contacts they made with faculty and staff, the leadership skills they

developed, and the feeling of rendering an important service to the university and to their fellow students. The author has found that some of the most positive development work she has done over a period of several years has been done with student orientation leaders. They frequently move on to positions of leadership and influence in the student body and make contributions to the retention efforts of the university.

Reinforcing the Student's Decision

The orientation program should reinforce the student's decision to attend the institution and should be a pleasant experience for new students while meeting their needs. Caring and interested faculty and staff members, activities designed to relieve anxieties, and making new friends provide the beginning of the "student-institution fit." Students should feel this reinforcement immediately. They should go home after an orientation program saying, "I made a good decision to attend this university."

Working With Freshmen

New freshmen, in their eagerness to learn and become a part of their new environment will do almost anything you want — for no more than two days. Freshmen respond to individual attention, structure, and people who are attempting to meet their needs. There comes a point at which they seem to have absorbed all they can and they leave for home, usually after they have registered for classes. The retention potential of the orientation program has been reached when the students leave saying, "This was great and I can't wait to come back."

Working With Transfer Students

You cannot do anything you want with transfer students. They have been to college and they feel they know how to get things done. Their major concern is the transfer of academic credits, receiving good academic advising, and getting enrolled in the appropriate courses. They know that they can establish friendships and probably know much about the campus already. They are attracted by a program of advising and registration rather than an orientation program that repeats the same things they did at their previous institution. Transfer students do not wish to be treated as freshmen or spoken to as freshmen; they respond to a straightforward approach treating them as experienced students. Student orientation leaders need to be trained to work with transfer students as much as they need training to work with freshmen.

Working With Parents

Orientation work with parents frequently has benefits for retention of students. Parents who have attended an orientation program designed for them have a better understanding of the pressures their children will encounter and of some of the normal changes they will see in them. These orientation-informed parents will frequently become reten-

tion agents by referring their sons/daughters to university offices that can assist with problems and concerns. Parents who have experienced good exposure to the university through orientation become the university's allies for retention.

Placing Responsibility for the Program

Committees generate ideas and goals, supply needed commentaries on the effectiveness of orientation activities, and build a base of support for the program in the university, but committees cannot run an entire program efficiently and effectively. The responsibility for the orientation program needs to be placed in a specific office or with a specific staff member. This action assures program accountability, continuity, coordination, and attention to the retention benefits of orientation programs.

Summary

The retention principles for orientation focus on creating a balanced program, utilizing effective university personnel, generating a good "student-institution fit" as early as possible in the new student's college career, and establishing the university as an institution which cares about its students. Orientation is the first formal exposure of many students to their new academic and social environment and serves to set the tone for many of their experiences to come. Institutions that develop orientation programs as the first of many retention activities have the new students and the institution off to a good start.

References

- Beal, P. E., & Noel, L. (1980). What works in student retention? The Report of a Joint Project of the American College Testing Program and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Iowa City, IA. The American College Testing Program.
- Lenning, O.T., Sauer, K., & Beal, P. E. (1980). *Student retention strategies*. (AAHE-ERIC/Higher Education Research Report No. 8.) Washington, DC. American Association for Higher Education.
- Terenzini, P.T., & Pascarella, E.T. (1980). Toward the validation of Tinto's model of college student attrition: A review of recent studies. *Research in Higher Education*, 12, 271-282.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 89-125.