

“I Don’t Just Give Tours”: Examining What Students Learn from the Student Orientation Leader Experience

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Undergraduate student orientation leaders play a vital role in many new student orientation programs. Although the leaders assume many responsibilities, little is known about how these students benefit from this experience. This qualitative study examined what students learned from being student orientation leaders. Students’ learning occurred in four areas: intrapersonal growth, skill development, understanding of others, and understanding of the institution. Results of this study highlight the benefit of incorporating upper division leaders into orientation programs. In addition, it illustrates how new student programs provide a valuable experience for upper-division continuing students as well as new students in transition.

New student orientation programs are a staple in many institutions’ slate of first-year programming efforts. Orientation programs have been created and sustained on many campuses as a way to ease students’ transition from high school to college (Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996). According to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (2008), the mission of orientation programs includes

Facilitating the transition of new students into the institution; preparing students for the institution’s educational opportunities and student responsibilities; initiating the integration of new students into the intellectual, cultural, and social climate of the institution. (p. 3)

To assist in fulfilling the mission of new student orientation, many institutions utilize upper-division class students in their orientation programming. Student orientation leaders are expected to serve as role models and resource persons for incoming students. They may give tours of the campus, talk with students and families, participate in formal presentations, facilitate large and small group discussions, and help with logistics such as program registration, course scheduling, and housing (CAS, 2008). Since these students have first-hand knowledge of the student transition process—many having recently experienced

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it—they provide critical assistance to new students who are in the process of engaging in a similar experience.

A significant amount of research focused on the impact of student orientation programs for first-year students (see Mayhew, Vanderlinden, & Kim, 2009; Tinto, 1993, Umbaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999); however, little is known about how upper division students who participate as orientation leaders may benefit from this experience. This qualitative study examined what students learned by being student orientation leaders. The results of this study highlight the benefit of incorporating upper-division leaders into orientation programs and illustrate how new student programs can provide valuable experience for continuing students as well as new students in transition.

Theoretical Framework

This study was framed by Astin's (1984) student involvement theory and Weidman's (1989) model of undergraduate socialization. According to Astin's student involvement theory, students learn and change by getting involved with their institutional environment: people, ideas, social and academic experiences, and opportunities. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy a student expends on an activity. It can be measured in terms of quantity (how often a student engages) or the quality of the interaction (the level or intensity of the involvement). The amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to quality and quantity of engagement (Astin, 1984).

The role of a student orientation leader requires a significant amount of involvement in the life of an institution. Orientation leaders are expected to be ambassadors for the institution. They spend time learning institutional policies, programs, and services; training to facilitate and present for small and large groups; collaborating with their peer orientation leaders; interacting with faculty and staff at their institution, assisting parents; and serving as teachers, guides, and mentors to incoming students. Astin's (1984) theory would presume that since student orientation leaders are highly engaged in many different facets of the institution, learning should occur.

Weidman's (1989) model of undergraduate socialization asserts that collegiate experiences can play a role in shaping and changing a student's knowledge, skills, or dispositions. Students bring to college a certain set of beliefs, assumptions, and goals. Although students continue to be influenced by their family, the collegiate experience can also play a significant role in shaping, changing, or affirming student's beliefs, values, and goals. This study examines whether or not the collegiate experience of being a student orientation leader influences a student's knowledge, skills, or disposition.

Publications such as *How College Affects Students* (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and *What Matters in College* (Astin, 1993) provide numerous examples illustrating the relationship between leadership experiences and student learning. Pozner and Rosenberger's (1997) quantitative study focused on new student

orientation leaders and found a relationship between the leadership ability of orientation leaders and the effectiveness of the new student programs. Research on peer mentors, a role similar to the role of student orientation leader, has shown that students in these roles enhance their communication and leadership styles (Benjamin, 2004) as well as contribute to student satisfaction and persistence (Tien, Roth, & Kampmeier, 2002). This study merged the previous research by using a qualitative methodology to focus on the new student orientation leader experience.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the orientation leader experience for upper division orientation leaders. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research question: What do upper-division student orientation leaders learn as a result of being new student orientation leaders?

Methodology

Setting

This study focused on student orientation leaders at a large, four-year public institution in the Midwest. Student orientation leaders assist with the orientation program that occurs during the month of June. They also work in July and August to prepare for welcome week activities.

Throughout the summer, orientation leaders interact with over 11,000 students, family members, and guests. Orientation leaders have a variety of responsibilities: they participate in formal presentations, assist with check-in of guests, provide directions, give campus tours, assist with course registration, complete administrative tasks, and act as a resource for information on campus programs and services. As they carry out these responsibilities, they interact and collaborate with faculty, staff, current students, and one another. Student orientation leaders also receive feedback on a regular basis from professional staff members and each other.

The goal of this research was to examine the experiences of student orientation leaders in order to better understand the impact of these experiences on students' lives. As such, this study utilized a phenomenological approach as its methodological framework. Phenomenology is defined as "the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 112). Phenomenological research describes both people's experience and their thoughts about their experience of the phenomenon studied (Glesne, 1999). The phenomenon in this case is the experience of the student orientation leader at a large, public Midwest institution.

Participants

All students who served as orientation leaders in Summer 2010 were invited to participate in a focus group. Of the 35 student orientation leaders, 16 participated.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from five focus groups during December 2010 and January and February 2011. The focus groups took place approximately five months after the students had completed their summer orientation leader responsibilities. Focus groups were used as the method of data collection and were particularly fitting for this study because “[t]his method assumes that an individual’s attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum: People often need to listen to others’ opinions and understandings in order to form their own” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 114).

The focus groups used a non-standardized interview technique (Denzin, 1978); a list of prescribed questions allowed for follow-up questions by the interviewer. Focus group interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Inductive coding procedures (Seidman, 1998) were used, reviewing each transcript separately and coding data into specific categories. Themes from each of the focus groups were compared to uncover similarities and differences among participants’ responses.

Various approaches were used to ensure trustworthiness. In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to having results that are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data and member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Triangulation involves using multiple investigators or multiple sources of data to arrive at findings (Merriam, 1998). To triangulate the data, two investigators collected and analyzed the data.

Member checking was also utilized to ensure trustworthiness. Member checks involve “soliciting feedback about one’s data and conclusions from the people you were studying...” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 94). Results of the data and the conclusions were sent to participants for their clarification and confirmation (Merriam, 1998). Comments from the participants were then incorporated into the results.

Results

Data were analyzed to answer the question: What did students learn through their experience as a student orientation leader? Of the 16 students who participated, ten were male and six were female. Four students were seniors, nine were juniors, and three were sophomores. Through the coding process, four primary themes emerged: intrapersonal growth, skill development, understanding of others, and understanding of and pride in their institution.

Intrapersonal Growth

Students mentioned that the orientation leader role helped them learn more about themselves: “I thought [the orientation leader experience] was a really great experience, helping me learn how to grow and improve myself while I’m here.” Many students commented that the position challenged them to go beyond what they thought they were capable of doing. One student commented, “It really helps build your confidence. I came out of the summer with all these new skills and being more comfortable with who I was.”

Two students expressed the following:

I learned a lot more about myself and what I was capable of. That was one of the biggest things I learned—being able to speak in front of a few hundred students and being completely comfortable with it. That was something that I wasn’t sure I could do.

I realized that I can do a lot more than I thought I could. I thought that I hated working with people in high school. And now I realized that I really do love it. I can be a lot more flexible and take on a lot more responsibilities.

Skill Development

The student orientation leader position enhanced the skill development of orientation leaders in a variety of ways. One student noted, “It’s amazing to see the difference between what I was my freshman year and what I am now. This position had a huge impact on that.” Students talked about the skills they learned and their ability to apply these skills in new environments.

Learning skills. Students listed various skills they learned through the student orientation leader experience. Some students identified specific skills, such as communication:

It’s definitely a skills development opportunity. You come out of the experience being able to communicate not only one-on-one with a total stranger, but being able to step in front of 400 people feel[ing] comfortable and competent about what you know.

Other students understood their role and responsibility more broadly: “Being a student orientation leader was about helping people that needed help, whenever they needed it. Part of your job was not only knowing to help people, but how to help.” Still others summarized the orientation leader experience as a unique opportunity to strengthen skills in many different areas:

I don’t know of any other place on campus that provides as many opportunities [as] this position. I can’t think of anything that gives you so many different skills, and allows you to find yourself and ways that you can make a difference. Honestly, I don’t know where else.

Many students expressed their surprise at how much and what they learned.

On reflecting back, they realized they learned more than what they had originally anticipated. The following statements illustrate this sentiment:

I think I've learned a lot that I wasn't expecting....When I go home and see people or my parents have friends over, I'm able to talk to them and make these conversations that I don't think I would have been able to before.

It showed me that things I thought I wouldn't be good at, you can actually be good at. I never thought I would be extroverted, and make small talk, and be able to communicate as well, but it showed me that I actually can do that.

Applying skills. Students also mentioned how they utilized the skills from the orientation leader experience into other activities such as applying for jobs or graduate school:

I'm applying for physical therapy school this summer, and all of them interview. I feel so confident about the interviewing part.... I learned a lot about interviewing from being a student orientation leader.

The skills students learned through the orientation leader experiences led to other opportunities. One student added a speech communication minor "as a direct result of being a [student orientation leader]." Another student was asked to be an ambassador for the college. For another student, the experience influenced the decision to go into the student affairs profession:

It helped solidify the fact that I want to go into student affairs. You don't know about it when you're in college, that [student affairs] exists, and that you can go into that.... This [position] helped me figure out a career path that I would really like.

Students also consistently recognized how the skills they were learning were now "a part of them." It wasn't simply that students learned a task, but rather incorporated their experiences into who they were as a person:

Even though it's only for a year, you never unlearn the things that we learn. You never unlearn seeing a kid standing there with a map, and you never unlearn not to go over there and ask, "Can I help you?" When someone asks you for help you never say, "No, I'm not going to help you." It's a mentality now.

It [the position] teaches you life skills, and how to work with people. Those are always important, regardless of what profession you're going into...just kind of ingrains in you specific aspects, and whether or not you like those aspects or not.

Other students defined their learning as one of "professionalism." For these students, the skills they learned were important to being a good "professional," and were applicable to everyone, regardless of his or her career: "I did learn a lot about professionalism. I always want to be early to things, but five minutes

before—we learned that’s the right time. Learning the right way to do things, what’s appropriate.”

Understanding Others

The orientation leader position required students to interact with students and families and work closely with their peers. Students provided several examples of how these interactions impacted them. One student summarized:

[I was] learning about people and how they interact. I’ll be the first to admit I wasn’t really sensitive to how people thought and felt about things.... I think it’s probably best to learn those skills now.

Students gained experience in working and interacting with students from different backgrounds and experiences. Orientation leaders could not pick and choose with whom they wanted to work; they were expected to interact with everyone. As a result, they had to develop their interpersonal skills:

Being able to understand people and not making first judgment...there were people at orientation dressed up in cowboy hats and boots and then people completely dressed in black and purple. But they’re students like the rest of us that have the same need of finding their college, finding their major, finding something to do with the rest of their life. Just not taking that first step to judge them...it gives a new meaning to empathy and putting yourself in somebody else’s shoes.

The student orientation group, which was comprised of students from a variety of backgrounds and majors, also provided an opportunity to interact with a more diverse group of students. Students identified the benefits of working closely with this larger group of student orientation leaders: “I also almost felt like my [current friend] group was narrow...but now I know individuals from all different colleges, and they’re all different, so it really expanded the diversity of my friend group.”

Another student articulated the challenges and benefits of working with the larger group of orientation leaders and students:

I’m not a very patient person, so to have to work on my patience over the summer was a huge thing, and I just progressed so much. Getting to work with all facets of different individuals, I had a blast and learned a lot about leadership.... It was a great opportunity.

Understanding of and Pride in Institution

As ambassadors, students were trained on the many services, programs, and policies of the institution. They also interacted with faculty and staff in a different capacity. One student observed: “I learned a ton about the university.... Getting to meet all the people that run the departments was a real eye opener.”

Through the new information about the institution and interaction with other faculty and staff members, students developed pride in their institution:

It makes you appreciate everything more. It makes you appreciate the staff, the university...and you display that when you talk to people. You know, because I, love [this institution].

I was always a fan and loved being here, but now I've been so die hard, I love [institutional name]. And maybe part of that is because it's my senior year, and so I'm emotional about leaving, but I think part of it was my pride for [the institution] grew so much over the summer."

Another student mentioned how the experience changed the student's role at the institution from one of participant to a representative: "It helped me realize my position at [the institution], that I'm not just a student, but I'm a representative now."

"I'm More than a Tour Guide"

People would ask, "What are you doing this summer?" and I'm like, "I'm working with the school orientation." And they'd say, "Oh, you give tours?"

In the process of discussing what they learned, students expressed their frustration in trying to communicate the significance of their orientation role with family and friends. Although students had important responsibilities during orientation and were learning many different skills, their parents and peers seemed to think that they were simply "tour guides." One student summarized what many of their peers had felt and experienced: "My mom would always say, 'he's giving tours this summer.' No! We do so much more!" While giving tours may be a part of the orientation leader role, the leadership skills acquired through the experience went far beyond those learned by walking new students around campus.

Discussion

This study sought to answer the following research question: What do upper-division student orientation leaders learn as a result of being new student orientation leaders? The results of the study indicate that the student orientation leader experience impacted student learning in four areas: intrapersonal growth, skill development, understanding of others, and understanding of and pride in the institution. The student orientation leader position required students to take on a variety of tasks. Although they were trained, the work of the student orientation leader was not scripted. Orientation leaders were constantly sought out to answer questions, discuss campus resources, or handle students' and families' frustrations. As students reflected on the position and all that they had achieved, they expressed a sense of surprise and satisfaction at their accomplishments.

The results of this study support Astin's (1984) theory of involvement: students' engagement with their institutional environment influenced student learning. Student orientation leaders were involved in their institutional environment in a variety of ways. They worked closely with full-time student affairs members who hired, trained, and supervised them. Their responsibilities required them to be active and responsible team members. They spent a significant amount of time interacting with their peers and with other faculty and staff members on campus. Student orientation leaders had to become familiar with the resources, services, and policies of their institution and understand the information well enough to communicate it to prospective students and their families.

Astin's (1984) theory of involvement purports that personal development is directly related to the quantity and quality of involvement. If quantity is defined as frequency of interactions and quality is defined as intensity of involvement, it is not surprising that the student orientation leader experience had an impact on student learning. Students are actively involved in the orientation experience for an entire academic year. During the summer months, orientation leaders can expect to work at least eight-hour days. In addition, orientation leaders not only need to learn about the campus, they need to apply this knowledge in a variety of situations, and they are frequently evaluated on their effectiveness and competencies in these tasks. This level and intensity of engagement impacts student learning.

The results of this study also support Weidman's (1989) socialization theory, which asserts that socialization that occurs in college can impact students' knowledge, skills, and disposition. Student orientation leaders identified learning in all three areas. They learned more about their university. They identified specific skills of communication—intrapersonal and interpersonal. Students also mentioned that they integrated what they learned into their lives: the skills and approach to helping others became a part of who they were. It became a mindset versus a specific set of job-related tasks.

Several students noted it wasn't just a "job" but an experience, implying that this had a greater impact on their life than simply a way to make money. Weidman's socialization theory asserts that interactions with people and experiences within college can help to transform college students. The results of this study illustrate how the student orientation leader experience, which provides an opportunity for students to gain confidence in communication skills and challenges them to understand and interact with others from different backgrounds, has the power to change college students' outlook and values.

Implications for Student Orientation Programs

The results of this study shed new light on the importance of new student orientation and transition programs. Past research has documented the value of orientation programs for new students. This study illustrates the benefit of new student orientation programs for upper-division students. Student orientation leaders have the opportunity interact with peers, new students, family members,

faculty, and staff. In addition to “tour guides,” the students are also coordinators, facilitators, presenters, resource persons, and problem solvers. Performing these various roles enhances students’ intrapersonal growth, skill development, and understanding of others.

In their book, *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) outline effective educational practices that enhance student engagement and learning. One of these practices—enriching educational experiences—is the institution’s ability to “provide opportunities for students to synthesize, integrate, and apply knowledge” (p. 219). Training upper-division students to become orientation leaders is one such “best practice” in that it allows students to learn new skills, synthesize and integrate these skills into their broader set of skills, and apply these skills while working with their peers, faculty, staff, and new students and families. The results of this study provide evidence of the value of new student orientation programs in creating enriching educational experiences—not only for new students, but upper-division students as well.

Students mentioned that being an orientation leader increased their pride in their institution. Research has found that students who are most satisfied with their undergraduate education tend to be more involved alumni (Clotfelter, 2003; Gaier; 2005); therefore, by involving upper-division students in orientation leadership roles, new student programs also can contribute to the institutions’ fundraising and alumni support programs. In other words, by having upper division students welcome and engage new students in the college transition process, new student programs may also be creating more supportive and engaged alumni.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are several limitations associated with this study. This research focused on one cohort of orientation leaders, and of this cohort, only half of the eligible participants chose to participate. It may be that those students who chose not to participate had a different experience than those who were interviewed. Studies that examined the experiences of other cohorts of orientation leaders may provide additional information.

As mentioned earlier, new student orientation programs and student orientation leader experiences vary across institutions. This study focused on the orientation leader experience at one institution and may not be applicable to orientation leader experiences elsewhere. Future studies focused on what student orientation leaders learn at other institutions would add credibility to these results. Since the orientation leaders may take on different roles at different institutions, using a multiple institution approach may help to identify those experiences (i.e., presenting, coordinating, and working with faculty) that have the most significant impact on student learning.

The data for this study was collected after a semester of the student orientation summer experience. A longitudinal study could capture students’ perceptions of the experience a year or two after the experience and could also assess the impact of the position on their future careers and interests. Many of the students interviewed

planned to be involved in additional leadership experiences. A future study could assess how the student orientation leader experience compares to or prepares students for future leadership opportunities.

Conclusion

The student orientation leader experience requires a significant investment of time and energy for the students and the staff who oversee the program. This qualitative study illustrates the impact of the student orientation leader program on students' intrapersonal growth, skill development, understanding of others, and institutional pride. The results support Astin's (1984) theory of involvement and Weidman's (1989) theory of socialization. These findings suggest that, in addition to assisting new students, orientation programs that utilize students in leadership roles provide valuable experiences for upper-division students.

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