

A Comprehensive Graduate Orientation Program: Practicing What We Preach

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Article:

Student affairs professionals have become experts on the socialization process of new students to the college environment (Bragg, 1976). Sadly, however, this knowledge, so readily applied to undergraduates, is rarely applied to the graduate student experience. Indeed, the graduate student experience has been called "the great unaddressed academic issue in higher education" (Pruitt-Logan & Isaac, 1995, p. 1).

Studying 180 graduate students in three different disciplines, Winston (1976) found that entering students had significantly unrealistic expectations that did not match those of continuing students or faculty. Winston observed that "entering graduate students take the concept of community seriously" (1976, p. 47). Further, "since entering graduate students . . . had unrealistic expectations of their departmental environments, serious attention should be paid to the process through which they are introduced to graduate study" (Winston, 1976, p. 48).

As Baird (1995) observed, "Students enter graduate schools directly from undergraduate colleges or after some intervening experience. Both kinds of students enter a new environment that can present numerous challenges" (p. 26). Of the three stages of socialization to a new environment, the first stage of *anticipatory socialization* (Feldman, 1976) may provide the most hope for program success. During this stage, students form expectations and attitudes and make decisions about the program and institution before they physically enter the new environment and start classes. It is at this stage that unrealistic expectations, such as those identified by Winston (1976), develop (Louis, 1980). Traditionally, however, anticipatory socialization is the most underdeveloped resource in the success cycle. Louis (1980) emphasized that energy spent in anticipatory socialization to create realistic, positive images of the new environment reduces involuntary and voluntary retreat or withdrawal from that environment once the student has matriculated. The opportunity points for intervention in this stage include program publications, personal contact such as letters, phone calls, and visits, transmittal of program culture, and creating a sense of community to enhance the degree of realistic readiness. This article describes a comprehensive graduate orientation program.

The Comprehensive Orientation Model

The College Student Personnel (CSP) program at the University of Maryland provides a comprehensive orientation for new graduate students. Several components comprise the orientation program, which spans the time from a prospective student's first inquiry through the first semester of enrollment. The goals of the comprehensive orientation program are to provide the student with opportunities to assess self, professional field, and institution for "fit," to provide accurate and timely needed information; to personalize the graduate program; to create a sense of community; and to assist the new student in making the transition to graduate school. Baird (1995) has described graduate education as "a process of socialization to an ultimate professional role" (p. 25); making a successful transition to graduate school is the first step in that socialization process.

Admissions Newsletter

Students who inquire about the CSP program receive a welcome letter, a curriculum/program guide for the program in which the student is interested (master's or Ph.D.), and an admissions newsletter, which provides practical information about the curriculum, application process, and aid. In addition, the newsletter provides more personal information about the program, including profiles of faculty members and summaries of recent research completed by CSP graduate students. Photographs of students and faculty add a further personal touch to this publication. The purpose of this component of the comprehensive orientation program is both to provide timely information and to personalize the program.

The Buddy System

Once an application has been received and screened, if an applicant will be offered an interview, he/she is assigned to a current student who serves as the prospective student's "buddy." The buddy is in touch with and available to the prospective student throughout the application process to respond to questions and concerns from a student perspective. Only continuing students (that is, students who will still be enrolled at the time of the new student's matriculation) are used as buddies to provide continuity in the support relationship. In many cases close friendships are formed that extend into the new student's enrollment.

Buddies participate in a brief training in which roles and expectations are reviewed. Buddies are provided with information most commonly requested by prospective students and are encouraged to refer any questions to which they feel they cannot respond adequately. Current students serving as buddies are encouraged to provide honest responses to questions posed by prospective students, rather than to see themselves as "selling" the program. Through the buddy system, current students have the opportunity to extend themselves to help newcomers, as well as to realize how quickly they have become experts; it also permits students to enhance community in the program by contributing to the well-being of others. This phase of the orientation program provides additional information, personalizes the program further through direct contact, and begins community building.

The Preview Program

Obtaining financial support and professional experience are primary concerns of graduate students in student affairs (Komives, 1993). Many, indeed, indicate that they could not enroll without financial support.

The Preview Program brings admitted students to the campus for a two and a half day program during which students interview for graduate assistantship, become acquainted with the faculty and current students as well as their future classmates, meet with their advisors and register for classes, tour the campus, and attend programs designed to acquaint them with the graduate program. The components of the Preview Program and their relative emphasis have been guided by a hierarchy of needs of newly admitted students (Maslow, 1963); students at this time are primarily interested in basic survival information and assistance, such as aid, course registration, and basic housing information. Newly admitted students frequently begin to form friendships with one another during the Preview Program.

Transition Communications

A new student listserv permits the newly admitted students to communicate with one another to build on the relationships they established during their visit to campus. The graduate program uses the listserv to distribute regular notices concerning housing, assistantship updates, and so on. Newly admitted students also receive a series of regular mailings including articles on what careers in students affairs are (which they are encouraged to share with their families) and a student-developed checklist of things to do before arriving on campus and things to bring (such as immunization records).

TABLE 1.

1997 New Student Evaluation of Pre-Matriculation Experiences by Category ($n = 15$)

Component	Importance Mean (SD)	Effectiveness Mean (SD)
<i>Early Contact Components</i>		
admissions newsletter	4.07 (0.73)	4.43 (0.65)
program description	4.87 (0.35)	4.74 (0.46)
e-mail access to program	4.08 (0.95)	4.15 (1.40)
phone calls to program	3.73 (1.98)	3.50 (1.74)
admission interview	4.87 (0.35)*	4.53 (0.64)
campus visit	3.00 (2.24)	2.70 (2.29)
contact with my buddy	4.40 (0.99)	4.47 (0.74)
<i>Preview Program Components</i>		
the whole Preview Program	5.00 (0.00)	4.80 (0.41)
mailings for the program	4.67 (0.49)	4.60 (0.51)
housing for preview	3.64 (1.78)	3.50 (0.53)
airport transportation	2.57 (2.34)	2.43 (2.24)
meeting my classmates	4.67 (0.62)	4.60 (0.63)
meeting current students	4.43 (0.76)	4.29 (0.73)
meeting faculty	4.93 (0.27)	4.79 (0.43)
pro-seminar on student research	3.21 (1.48)	3.21 (1.85)
meeting with my faculty advisor	4.87 (0.35)	4.33 (1.50)
assistantship information	4.64 (1.34)	4.50 (1.35)
my interview schedule	4.43 (1.34)	4.29 (1.35)
<i>Post-Preview Program Components</i>		
assistantship offer process	4.57 (1.34)*	3.79 (1.58)
the new student electronic list	3.93 (1.33)	3.79 (1.57)
communications after Preview	4.47 (0.52)	4.47 (0.52)
summer lunches	2.43 (1.74)	2.79 (2.00)
my welcome to my new GA office	4.21 (1.37)	4.00 (1.40)
the CSP orientation program	3.00 (1.89)	2.53 (1.89)

* significant difference $p < .05$

Summer Orientation

Summer orientation occurs in two parts: a series of informal welcome lunches and a formal orientation program. Beginning in July, Tuesdays are designated as welcome lunch days at a local restaurant. Current students and faculty sign up to "host" on various days. The first few Tuesdays are sparsely attended, but attendance grows as new students arrive in town. Most newcomers attend at least one lunch early in their arrival. The intention of these lunches is to alleviate the isolation new students frequently feel as they arrive and move in.

Just before classes begin, new students participate in a formal orientation program. Because students' more basic needs for employment, housing, and course registration have been met, this orientation program can focus on higher-order needs such as acquaintanceship and involvement. The program includes passive programming: a display table with copies of items that new students might need, including recreation schedules, handbooks, athletic schedules, computer lab information, and so on. The orientation program provides students with the opportunity to obtain information and to begin to become a part of the graduate program community.

Professional Orientation Class

New students' orientation into the program, the institution, and the profession continues through-out the first semester. This stage of socialization has been called the *encounter stage* (Louis, 1980). During this stage students confront the realities of their new environment (Louis, 1980). This stage is critical in "shaping the individual's long-term orientation to the organization" (Louis, 1980, p. 230). One of the key elements of this on-going orientation is the Professional Orientation class. This course both introduces students to the field of student affairs and important professional issues in the field and guides students through the first semester and helps them understand what to expect from the program throughout their tenure. According to Baird (1995), graduate education can be described as "a process of socialization to an ultimate professional role" (p. 25). He identifies graduate faculty and graduate student peers as the key socialization agents for this process.

Evaluation

Student response to the various components of the comprehensive orientation approach has been extremely favorable. Students frequently comment about how welcoming the materials and programs are. On evaluation materials students have strongly indicated that elements of the comprehensive orientation approach helped them understand the graduate program better, increased their familiarity with the institution, and provided good opportunities to interact with current and new students. Over time changes have been made to the elements of the comprehensive orientation approach to respond to student feedback on evaluations.

The most recent evaluation was conducted with the students who matriculated in Fall 1997 ($N = 20$) and focused on students' perceptions of the importance and the effectiveness of the various components of the comprehensive orientation approach. Each component was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *low*, 5 = *high*). Response rate was 75% ($n = 15$). T tests were calculated to compare means on importance and effectiveness ($p < .05$). Respondents indicated no significant differences between their perceptions of the importance of most socialization elements and their perceptions of the effectiveness of that element. Results are presented in Table 1.

All respondents rated the whole Preview Program as extremely important. Other important elements of the Preview Program to respondents were meeting faculty, meeting faculty advisor, meeting classmates, Preview Program mailings, and assistantship information, all of which met students' expectations. In addition, the most important early contacts are the program description, the admissions interview, and contact with the buddy. The admissions interview was rated as significantly less effective than important, although both ratings were quite high (4.53 and 4.87, respectively). Likewise, the process used to make assistantship offers was significantly less effective than it was important (3.79 and 4.57, respectively). Although not statistically significant, it is interesting that students' ratings of the effectiveness of contact with the buddy, e-mail access to the program, and the admissions newsletter were higher than their ratings of the importance of these elements.

This most recent evaluation indicates that some components of the comprehensive orientation program may need to be redesigned, particularly the components that occur during the summer. Students were neutral about the value and effectiveness of the summer orientation program and somewhat negative about the value and effectiveness of the summer lunches. It appears that students feel fairly well oriented by summer. However, it is worth noting that these components had large standard deviations, indicating that some really liked or needed the intervention whereas others found these to be less important.

Conclusion

In student affairs we long have applied our knowledge and expertise to serving the needs of the undergraduate students on our campuses. This same knowledge and expertise that has served undergraduate students so well can be used to ease the transition of and respond to the expectations of our entering graduate students. The comprehensive orientation approach out-lined here is one such effort.

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