
ORIENTATION FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Linda E. Wegryn

Trends in the development of orientation programs for first year students are reviewed and the role of student development in orientation is presented. The author suggests that associate instructors for introductory-level courses who are trained in cognitive styles could provide a means for integrating orientation with the classroom experience.

Easing the transition to college for first year students has long been a concern of faculty and administration in higher education. Successful acclimation to a host of new intellectual, physical, and social demands is likely to be a major determinant of the student's academic and personal achievement, as well as the overall satisfaction with the college experience. According to Shaffer and Martinson, the primary goal of the orientation process is communicating to the student that college is a "self-directed, intellectually-oriented experience" (1966, p. 23). Beyond this academic emphasis, the college should provide both the student and parent with (1) general information about the college; (2) counseling; and (3) aid with enrollment, registration, and other "mechanical" aspects of the matriculation process (Shaffer & Martinson, 1966).

That orientation is, or should be a multi-faceted process becomes clear through consideration of both the developmental concerns of college freshmen and the complexity of the college environment. This paper briefly reviews trends in orientation for traditional age (18 years old) freshmen; highlights several unique or experimental programs, and suggests to student affairs staff some possible future programming directions for orientation activities.

Linda Wegryn will receive her M.S. in Education in May 1981. After receiving a B.S. at Indiana University, she worked as a research associate in employment and training/human resources development for the National Institute of Public Management in Washington, D.C. She is currently a career adviser at the Career Center and a consultant with the American Council on Education, where she worked as a special assistant last summer.
Philosophy and Goals

Ideally, most orientation programs aim to assist the student in developing immediate relationships with the institution. This "microcosmic" view of articulation would encompass such functions as pre-registration advising and counseling and lectures on study habits and student activities (Patty, 1966). These functions are essentially "the final stage of the admissions process" (Mueller, 1961). In addition, the program should be concerned with orienting the new student to the mission of higher education. This latter "macrocosmic" view emphasizes the intellectual aspects of college life, the purposes of higher education, and the discussion of vital issues (Busch & Fitzgerald, 1962). A survey by Powell (1959) indicated that most orientation programs did indeed aim to achieve both macroscopic and microcosmic goals.

The goals of orientation necessarily vary among colleges and universities according to the institution's mission. Generally, however, program goals tend to be concerned with developing the whole student, and with facilitating a "smooth fit" into the day to day operation of the institution (Kaufmann, 1968). In line with these general goals, an American College Personnel Association (ACPA) report identified three major phases of the orientation process: (1) eliminating or containing students' anxieties through pre-orientation activities, academic advising, etc.; (2) fostering belonging and involvement through participation in residence hall and student activities; and (3) achieving identity of person by providing opportunities for developing a sense of competence and self-worth both in class and in programs (White, 1973).

Dannels and Kuh (1977) identified two general categories of orientation goals: (1) those designed to disseminate information; and (2) those designed to facilitate adjustment. More specifically, Erickson (1969) has articulated adjustment goals that include:

1. minimizing anxiety and maximizing contact with peers;
2. providing opportunity for contact with relevant parts of the system and all members of that system;
3. making the uniqueness of the student an integral part of the program;
4. providing a continual feedback process;
5. creating a favorable disposition toward learning; and
6. enhancing positive feelings about chances of success.

The successful realization of such a wide range of goals implies that orientation be a continuing process. Integration of these goals with an institution's student development initiatives is essential for a successful orientation program.

Historical Perspective

The orientation course was the first formal method of assisting new students in their adjustment to college life. Boston University provided the first course with the specific purpose of orienting students in 1888 (Wharton, 1942). Academic credit was first granted for a similar course by Reed College in 1911. It is estimated that during the 1930s one-third of all colleges and universities in the United States were offering such courses; and by 1938, nine out of ten freshmen were required to take them (Wharton, 1942). The modes of instruction often included lectures, testing, laboratory experiences, field trips, and individual conferences. In some cases, sessions for faculty advisors were also offered.

One alternative orientation format, initiated by the University of Maine in 1928, is "Freshman Week," where activities are concentrated in the week before the fall semester (Drake, 1966). Shaffer and Martinson (1966) observed that such concentrated efforts often result in "dis-orientation" weeks, where the whirlwind of activities and information overload present a "biased, chaotic and distorted perception of higher education" (p. 24).

Another alternative which first appeared at Michigan State University in 1949 (Drake, 1966) was the pre-college summer orientation program, which emphasized small group activities and academic planning. This type of program is still prominent today, and is often used in combination with Freshman Week, which emphasizes social activities and the students' initial "settling in" to the college environment (Van Hecke, 1978).

The implementation of the various program formats has increasingly drawn upon student resources (e.g., the use of upperclass students as orientation paraprofessionals). During the 1960's, this practice was examined in light of research about peer group influence and general student development theory, which resulted in systematizing and lengthening the training programs for student orientation advisors (Van Hecke, 1978).

The semester or year-long course decreased in popularity after the 1930's and tended to be replaced with short-term intensive orientation sessions such as precollege or freshman week (Van Hecke, 1978; Caple, 1964). This transition from course to an intensive out of class experience has been attributed to a combination of faculty resistance to teaching non-academic courses and to financial considerations.

However, the orientation course has received increased attention in recent years. There has been a "rediscovery" of the importance of orientation as a continual process, rather than a one-time event (Van Hecke, 1978). In addition to freshmen courses, workshop series have been used throughout the country in an attempt to provide ongoing assistance for college students.
The Role of Student Development

The philosophical basis of a continuing orientation program is developmental; that is, it takes into account where students are developmentally, and activities are designed accordingly. Although a course or workshop series format would more accurately reflect the "continuous" concept, the importance of a student’s initial exposure to the college environment cannot be overstated. Heath (1968) maintained that patterns of growth are largely determined in the first few months of college, and that subsequent growth represents a "further stabilization and integration of that growth." Smith and Swegan (1977) identified the first few weeks of a term as being particularly important in the development of a traditional age freshman’s attitudes and behavior.

The first year student faces many new developmental tasks during the initial exposure to a new environment. If the tasks presented are sufficiently challenging, growth will occur along one or more dimensions of academic or personal development. Chickering (1969) identified seven vectors along which growth occurs. The first three—developing competence, managing emotions, and developing autonomy—are perhaps the most pertinent to the traditional age new students. Developing competence is thought to encompass intellectual, physical and social adaptation. Managing emotions involves increasing awareness of feelings, integrating those feelings with other aspects of self, and gaining flexible control of impulses—particularly those involving sex and aggression. Developing autonomy is achieved on two levels: emotional independence, marked by a decrease in continuing need for reassurance, affection and approval; and instrumental independence, or gaining self-direction and the ability to solve one’s own problems. When independence is attained, the individual can then recognize interdependence with others.

Some demands placed upon the freshman by situations encountered at college will be particularly difficult. For example, developing intellectual competence will be a continuous challenge throughout the college experience. This underscores the importance of an orientation program which places due emphasis on intellectual/cognitive challenges, most critical during the initial weeks when major developmental patterns are being established (Heath, 1968).

SELECTED PROGRAMS

It seems that colleges and universities are expanding and attempting to improve orientation programs to offer more meaningful experiences to new students. Freshman courses and seminars are once again becoming popular methods of implementing an ongoing orientation program (Van Hecke, 1978). Group Life and human potential seminars are often used as integral components of orientation programs (Doman & Canada, 1975; Eckstein, 1977). This section will describe several current programs that emphasize a more comprehensive approach to orientation programming than the new student week or pre-college methods.

The Nebraska Experiment

The Nebraska Experiment was conceived by Cross as a response to the growing trend of student consumerism in higher education. Entitled “Helping Students Become More Sophisticated Consumers of Their Own Education,” the course emphasized “learning analysis” on the part of both students and faculty. Students are exposed to different teaching techniques and analyze their own reactions to these various styles. In this program, students rate their own learning rather than the teaching styles of their professors. The desired outcomes of class exercises are: (1) knowledge of one’s preferred learning style; (2) how to adapt to non-preferred learning situations; and (3) introduction to the psychology of learning (Trani, 1978).

The program also has a faculty development component in which faculty members share perspectives about teaching styles in addition to interacting with students (Trani, 1978).

Some of the problems identified with this program include the expense of implementation, which requires four or five faculty members per term. It has also been difficult for some faculty members to maintain the perspective of using their academic discipline to illustrate various teaching methods, rather than emphasizing the content of the discipline, to which they are generally accustomed. Trani (1978) suggested the alternative of having students use their concurrent course experiences as a basis for exploring their learning reactions, with assistance from an instructor trained in cognitive styles.

University 101

University 101 was designed in 1972 as a revitalization of the freshman year at the University of South Carolina. The course objectives were to improve student retention, promote faculty development, and "humanize" the university environment. The course, "The Student in the University," became a permanent course offering in 1973. It aimed to transmit to the college freshman the purpose of higher education and the potential roles of an individual student within university and other learning environments (Fidler, 1978). The basic components of the course include:

(1) visits to many campus resources and facilities; (2) class speakers, field trips; (3) discussions on topics of mutual interest and assigned topics; (4) peer teaching; (5) introduction to the professor's own discipline; (6) get acquainted exercises; (7) values clarification; (8) communication skills and listening skills
exercises; (9) group problem solving exercises; (10) class attendance at lectures; and (11) individual and group projects.

El Centro College—In-Class Orientation

Formal orientation activities at El Centro College are conducted by faculty during regular classes. The program not only assists freshmen with adjustment problems, but also actively involves older students in the class activities. The program’s philosophy is based upon the assumptions that: (1) properly prepared faculty are the best resource for student orientation and the interests of the institution are best served if all professionals share in the responsibility; and (2) orientation is an ongoing faculty obligation appropriately incorporated into the daily routine of teaching (Creamer & Kramer, 1978).

The student activities office prepares an orientation booklet which is given to both faculty and students before each class. This guidebook contains information, classroom exercises, and discussion ideas which are grouped into three categories: (1) general information; (2) attitude assessment, and (3) goal setting.

Advantages of the in-class method include: relatively simple administrative structure and low cost; the involvement of all professional staff; and a design which takes into account the nature of the student body and the mission of the institution. Some potential problems include lack of faculty cooperation and top-level administrative support, and insufficient preparation of faculty (Creamer & Kramer, 1978).

Structured Group Program (University of Rhode Island)

The structured group program is based on the concept that transition is limited to specific movements (physical, psychic, and social) experienced by the individual (Knott & Daher, 1978). The specific tasks of the new student during this transition include:

1. adapting to a new environment;
2. decision making and self-discipline (time management);
3. meeting new academic demands;
4. clarifying sexual roles and their expression;
5. resolving separation and loss (parents, peers, and stable environmental features); and
6. initiating new (adult-to-adult) relationships.

The program aims to help first year students develop a generally competent self-image, a willingness to actively engage in risk-taking behaviors, and the desire to seek out various stimuli to personal growth. Three sessions, which include a two-hour workshop on mapping skills and sessions on problem solving strategies and developing competencies, aim to fulfill four of the six tasks.

The two tasks which are not addressed in these sessions (meeting academic demands and clarifying sexual roles) are fulfilled by referring students to appropriate campus resources (Knott & Daher, 1978).

Trends in Higher Education

Two general trends in higher education—constrained budget resources and the student consumerism movement—will probably affect the orientation programs of the 1980s. Increasingly scarce resources will be allocated to only those programs which demonstrate a critically positive impact on the students’ experience in college. The current emphasis on social activities in many orientation programs will probably receive close scrutiny as resources diminish. Programs likely to survive will be those that demonstrate outcomes such as positive impact on student retention or academic achievement.

Orientation activities currently designed for the 18-year-old “traditional age freshman” will also be affected by the changing student population. As the average age of the student population becomes older, and as increasing proportions of special groups (e.g., minority, foreign, adult) are admitted to colleges and universities, it is likely that resources—both financial and human—will be redirected toward those interests.

Student consumers, as well as state legislators, will be examining the quality of higher education. They, too, will want some assurance that programs for which they pay will be of some educational benefit.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Those programs which include freshman courses or seminars (e.g., Nebraska Experiment and University 101) tend to be relatively expensive. Also, a common problem of these efforts is faculty resistance to becoming involved in teaching a “non-academic” course. El Centro’s in-class program allows faculty to integrate orientation into their regular classes, which drastically reduces the expenses of a separate orientation course. It can not, however, insure that faculty will consistently present orientation materials and activities within the classroom.

An alternative to the Nebraska Experiment format suggested by Trani (1978) could use instructors trained in cognitive styles to help students understand their own learning reactions, based on their regular classroom experiences. Associate instructors who lead discussion sections for faculty lectures may be able to satisfy this requirement if given adequate preparation. Introductory psychology, sociology, education, or other social science courses would be appropriate for relating course content with learning styles, personal development and adjustments, etc. As in the El Centro program, the student affairs division could provide training workshops and guidebooks for integrating orientation activities and
exercises with classroom discussion. This type of approach could help with minimizing anxiety, maximizing contact with peers, and promoting the uniqueness of the individual student within the system of higher education. Most importantly, the classroom situation would facilitate the student's developing a favorable disposition toward learning and enhancing positive feelings about the chances for success. Integrating this process into introductory-level courses is also likely to impact upon the greatest number of first-year students. It would place a primary emphasis upon the expectation that college is an intellectually-oriented experience.

Successful orientation programs in the future are likely to be comprehensive; emphasizing both cognitive and affective developmental needs of first-year students. Elements of programs surveyed in this paper which might be particularly beneficial in future programming include:

1. promoting understanding of students' learning reactions as an introduction to the academic requirements of higher education;
2. understanding the purpose, philosophy, and intellectual aspects of higher education;
3. adaptation to a new environment (coping skills, self-reliance, "mapping" skills, etc.); (4) self-affirmation (recognition and acknowledgement of personal strengths; (5) effective decision-making (reasoning and logic skills); (6) resolving separation and loss, initiating new relationships; and (7) values clarification.

With the assistance of student development professionals, an introduction to the orientation components listed above can be incorporated in the classroom. Ideally, additional opportunities for further exploration of these issues should be made available to students through workshops, seminars, and other group experiences on a continuous basis throughout the college career.

REFERENCES


Caple, R.B. A rationale for the orientation course. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 1964, 6, 42-46.


Fidler, P. *University 101: A model for student and faculty development*, University of South Carolina, unpublished paper, 1978.


Kaufmann, J. *The student in higher education*, 1968.


