# Escaping Boring Student Affairs Graduate Program Orientations

**Abstract**

A graduate program coordinator and graduate assistant developed an escape room to engage graduate students at orientation. Readers will understand the planning, implementation, and additional considerations to assist in creating an escape room activity.

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Graduate student orientation often occurs at both the campus-wide level and the programmatic level for incoming graduate students. According to Kinder et al. (2022), campus-wide graduate student orientations are designed to cover logistics and interpersonal belonging, relying on program faculty as academic content guides the program (Poock, 2006). Graduate school orientations rarely involve student affairs orientation professionals, whose expertise brings institutional belonging, academic success strategies, and adjustment skills to undergraduate student orientation programming. Moreover, today's Gen Z student population challenges professionals to gamify activities that challenge students to "think critically, make decisions, and solve problems in a dynamic and motivating environment" (Nazneen, 2024, p. 11). The master's program for college student personnel (CSP) at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) provided an opportune environment to devise programming that blended student affairs orientation expertise with the academic discipline.

## Context

Amy French served as an associate professor and the college student personnel graduate program coordinator at BGSU. Ebenezer Asiaw worked as the graduate assistant for CSP. Amy and Ebenezer were tasked with planning the graduate program's orientation. During brainstorming sessions, Ebenezer shared that as an international student, he felt isolated during the orientation he participated in and desired to refresh it. Through further discussion and referencing student evaluations from the previous year's orientation, we identified the importance of relationship building, teamwork, collaboration, and experiential learning to successfully complete graduate school.

Through brainstorming and research, we identified a different approach intended to welcome an increased number of international students, including introducing all students to the culture of the program, the student affairs profession, and student life on campus. Considering the popularity of gamifying activities, we chose an escape room to facilitate program knowledge. We considered how student affairs offices use case studies, scenarios, and role-play for training purposes (e.g., Behind Closed Doors). Melding genres from live-action role-playing, puzzle hunt, interactive theatre and haunted house experiences, the escape room had its genesis in Japan in 2007 (Nicholson, 2015). According to Nicholson (2015), an escape room is a "live-action team-based game where players discover clues, solve puzzles, and accomplish tasks in one or more rooms in order to accomplish a specific goal . . . in a limited amount of time" (p. 1). Scholars consider it a didactic tool that facilitates a sociocultural approach to learning (Ouariachi & Wim, 2020). Used for educational purposes, the escape room fosters cooperation, communication, critical thinking, and active learning (Taraldsen et al., 2022). This approach combines theoretical knowledge with practical skills while players work as a team (Gómez-Urquiza et al., 2019; Gordon et al., 2019). With this in mind, we created our first escape room.

## Planning

First, we reached out to campus partners who had conducted escape room–type events on campus, such as leadership programs, recreation and wellness, and residential life. Each campus partner shared resources such as software, training materials, access to professionals who had created similar activities, and props to create the desired setting. We designed puzzles to achieve goals of the activity, which included acquainting students to program history, content, and faculty; exposing students to the campus map, office spaces, and shuttle routes; and providing an experience that fosters teamwork, collaboration, and critical thinking.

We aimed to make the various escape room puzzles challenging but able to be accomplished in the allotted time. We used scenarios, artifacts, clues, and maps to highlight the students' individual and collective problem-solving skills. We included decoys to add complexity to the experience, and each contained educational value to the program. All content connected to the graduate program, campus, or life as a graduate student. We used online tools and artificial intelligence (AI) at times to assist us in the creation of materials. We identified key phrases to include, and we prompted AI to suppress rhyming words or phrases to accomplish certain tasks. This process saved us time and afforded us options as we created this specialized environment. The use of AI and online tools also aligns with NASPA's recommendations for student affairs leaders (Brady, 2024) by having leaders consider options beyond currently known applications, enhance programs, and foster a culture of innovation.

## Setup and Implementation

We set up the escape room in the College of Education building in a small meeting room that had a television, dimming lights, movable furniture, and space to partition off sections of the room with full-length rolling bulletin boards. We created five smaller sections within the open room so that participants could clearly identify the clues. Clues guide participants to successfully solve a puzzle. In some instances, multiple clues led the participants to solve one puzzle. We want to point out that although this activity was called an escape room, participants could physically exit at any time.

We charged two groups comprising seven to eight students with solving seven puzzles in each group within 30 min in order to escape successfully. The first puzzle that greeted the participants was a riddle and a pyramid of stacked cups with the students' names on them. Once solved, the puzzle provided the group with a blacklight flashlight needed to uncover future clues. Once the group had the blacklight flashlight, the students could complete puzzles in any order to unlock the lockbox. A few paths could lead to resolving certain puzzles, which meant there were multiple ways that puzzles could be solved. For example, students could solve a complex riddle that would provide the answer to the color lock, or students could observe images of buses hanging on the wall with the proper color lock sequence. Either path the students went down could lead to unlocking the color lock. Solving the clues led to unlocking a portion of a lockbox. During the 30 min, groups were allowed to ask one question of Amy and Ebenezer, who both stood outside the escape room observing the activity from windows. The clues are described in Table 1.

**Table 1**
*Escape Room Clues*

| Clue name | Location/Setup | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Stacked cups | This clue greeted students and contained a welcome note with specific instructions for the participants upon entry into the escape room. | Cups were stacked in a pyramid shape, with the students' names written on the cups. One cup was obviously out of alignment and contained a key to unlock a small box that held the blacklight flashlight. The flashlight would reveal multiple clues that the group would encounter later in the activity. |
| Faculty suites | The riddle was up on a full-length bulletin board to the left of the escape room entrance. A map of the faculty office suites was next to the riddle. Invisible ink circled the faculty office suite number, which was the answer. | This clue was a riddle that described where to find the faculty office suites with accompanying pictures that, when solved, revealed the names of the faculty members in the program. |
| Advising meeting | A desk was in the corner of the room, where a professional academic advisor might sit on one side of the desk and a student would sit facing the advisor. | This clue was in a physical file folder that contained detailed information about ways to be successful in graduate school, opportunities for involvement, and class scheduling suggestions. |
| Student union | Four-foot-tall blueprints of the student union were mounted on the wall with adhesive putty. | Important locations, such as the graduate assistant workspaces, were circled with invisible ink on the blueprints and could be revealed using the blacklight flashlight. |

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|---|---|---|
| Program guide | The program guide sat on a table with other College of Education materials, such as old photographs, program celebrations, and other paraphernalia. | This clue included the history of the program, faculty information, class details, practicum and graduate assistantship supervisory information. Certain course numbers were circled with invisible ink and could be revealed by using the blacklight flashlight. |
| Shuttle system | A campus map was out on a table along with the official university shuttle route. | This clue told a short story about a day in the life of the university's mascot. The story provided hints to stops along the shuttle route. The shuttle route uses a color-coding system and, upon following the story, students could unlock the color lock. |
| Cipher | This clue sat on its own table with pens and pencils surrounding the area so that multiple participants could work on deciphering the code together. | Throughout the room, letters that corresponded with certain images were hidden. For example, these clues were taped underneath stuffed animals, on the walls, inside boxes, beside the lockboxes, and so on. Once students revealed some, they could be used to solve the cipher riddle. |

We tested the escape room concept with various campus partners beforehand and fixed glitches to improve gameplay for participants. During the test run, we realized that we had made the cipher too complex for the time allotted. We rectified that by scattering more letter clues throughout the room. The campus partners also struggled to open the locks because they are quite different than traditional locks. We recommend providing participants with a brief tutorial on how the locks work before beginning the activity; alternatively, consider passing the lockbox around at the orientation to allow student participants to familiarize themselves with the locking system. Last, we learned that we needed to have extra printed copies of the materials to allow for a smooth setup between the groups.

## Observations

We observed the activity and conducted a postactivity discussion to gauge learning outcomes. Both groups solved six of the seven puzzles, which meant that no group "escaped" the escape room. The cipher halted one group, and the program guide stumped the other. The goals of the activity were achieved because the students learned the importance of working as a team and collaborating to solve challenging issues. Relying on one another's strengths, the students within each group sought ways to find solutions to challenges. For example, one student sat down at the cipher table and immediately started solving the puzzle. Another teammate observed that their colleague could not complete the task in the time provided. She ran around the room and realized there were clues to the cipher strewn all over the room. She shouted to the group, "Collect all the letters with symbols and bring them over here." That communication and fast thinking allowed their group to solve the cipher quickly.

Another group took a different strategy by dividing the clues up among the group and reading them aloud to one another before attempting to solve anything. This approach allowed each participant to have an active role in connecting the pieces and self-selecting in how they might be most beneficial to the team after initially assessing the tasks. This activity gave the students the opportunity to embrace their individual perspectives on finding solutions to problems while being challenged to think differently to make unified decisions. The escape room reinforced the value of peer support and highlighted that no individual can solve some issues alone. Students learned about the program and key campus locations, and they integrated this knowledge in innovative ways. They were excited to have participated in the activity and asked to do it again.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

We offer some recommendations for professionals and faculty coordinators responsible for onboarding new graduate students. The escape room required major time commitments from the organizers. We recommend that organizers pool resources, ideas, and games under one office to streamline parts of the process. In our case, the graduate college or student orientation office could have served as a clearinghouse for orientation leaders to add efficiency to the program development and setup portions of the process. Further, graduate faculty coordinators often conduct orientations specific to their academic areas. We recommend expanding this approach to include an escape room for a college-wide experience to bring graduate students from multiple disciplines together, provide campus-specific orientation information, and share the onboarding lift.

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