

Importance of Faculty Involvement in Orientation

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Interaction with faculty is a critical element of the college student experience. Orientation is perhaps the first, and among the most valuable, opportunities for an institution to intentionally shape new student perceptions of the faculty. By carefully crafting faculty involvement in Orientation, an institution can present its faculty as active, engaged, and caring members of the campus community. This article discusses the literature and research surrounding faculty-student interaction, including the value of early interaction, the impediments to faculty involvement in Orientation, and the opportunities for faculty involvement in academic and social programs. The authors conclude that faculty participation in Orientation is beneficial, possible, and critical. Orientation professionals should seek out faculty to participate, as students will ultimately form opinions about the campus culture from their experiences at Orientation. Positive interactions between professors and students at Orientation can contribute to students' ultimate success in college.

New Student Orientation often provides incoming students their first opportunity to spend a substantial amount of time on campus. As these students move through programs designed to ease their transition to a new environment, they are also making observations of and drawing conclusions about that environment. Even if they do not realize it, students begin to make judgments about the academic and social culture of the institution. These early judgments can have a lasting impact on the student, shaping his/her perceptions and actions well into the first semester. It is therefore in the best interest of colleges to create an atmosphere in which students believe they will have the necessary support to succeed both in and outside the classroom.

During the application process, students interact primarily with student affairs professionals. Therefore, many students arrive at Orientation somewhat unfamiliar with the faculty. These students know that their professors will lead their classes, but students may not know how professors are involved in the institution outside of the classroom. Orientation is perhaps the first, and among the most valuable, opportunities for an institution to intentionally shape new student perceptions of the faculty. By carefully crafting faculty involvement in Orientation, an institution can present its faculty as active, engaged, and caring members of the campus community.

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The Value of Early Faculty Interaction With Students

Faculty interaction with students is a critical element of the college student experience. It is one of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles of effective educational practice, and it is one of five key educational benchmarks identified by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2006). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) cite numerous studies demonstrating a link between student interaction with faculty and positive student outcomes. Moreover, Pascarella and Terenzini surmise that "student involvement will be greatest if new students can be *immediately linked* [italics added] with people who are already invested in the institution, whether faculty members or other students" (p. 650). Because these interactions are so valuable, institutions would be well served to use their orientation programs to create an environment that fosters such interactions.

In fact, Cotton and Wilson (2006) suggest that positive interactions with faculty can have a lasting effect on students' college experience. Cotton and Wilson found that freshmen and sophomores interviewed were not aware of the impact that a relationship with faculty could provide. It was the juniors and seniors who understood the importance of being connected to faculty. As one student described, "When a student has a relationship with a professor outside of class, number one, he feels that someone is interested in what he's saying. And, number two, he feels that he's connected to the community—the college community" (p. 499-500). Therefore, the first contact with faculty members must be an affirmative experience in order to ensure that students have the confidence to approach other faculty once the semester begins. The development of such a rapport can be facilitated by effective involvement of the faculty in orientation programs.

While the broad range of topics covered in Orientation may vary across institutions, these programs generally promote successful integration into the institution's social and academic environments. Smith and Brackin (2003) argued that when orienting students to the academic environment, orientation programs should not solely provide information about policies and program requirements; they should also allow for faculty interaction with the students. Involving the entire campus community, including the faculty, in orientation programs "is a prime factor in creating a community environment where entering students want to belong, perform, and contribute" (p. 40).

Thus, using a combination of professionals and faculty during Orientation would appear to fulfill what Miller, Dyer, and Nadler (2002) describe as a "meaningful experience that helps transition students to their new academic environment while simultaneously providing academic and social tools for success" (pp. 51-52). However, in a study of students following completion of Orientation at a private institution with an approximate enrollment of 10,000, Miller et al. found that faculty involvement was not impacting new students to the same degree other aspects of Orientation were. They discovered that, when compared to the mean score of 20 CAS Standards for New Student Orientation, the standard related to "developing positive relationships with institution's faculty" was lowest (p. 59). Though this study is limited in scope, it suggests the need to

examine not only *if* faculty members are involved in orientation programs, but also *how* they are involved.

Impediments to Faculty Involvement

While faculty involvement in Orientation may be impeded by many factors, some scholars have called particular attention to the faculty reward structure. For example, Manns (2002) suggested that the faculty reward system present at most colleges leaves little opportunity for faculty to connect with students outside the classroom. Because their tenure and promotion ultimately depend on research and scholarship, faculty members may not see any incentive to participate in orientation activities—regardless of the message this sends incoming students and the research which proves that faculty-student interaction generally has a positive effect on students. Accordingly, some student affairs professionals, perhaps believing faculty will decline any invitation to take part in the orientation process, may not actively seek faculty participation.

Pope (2001), however, suggests that some faculty members are interested in playing a role in Orientation and that student affairs representatives should advocate for their involvement. He continues, “This means more communication is necessary with chief administrators to encourage alternatives to present faculty workloads and to emphasize the importance of student development philosophies and processes and their role in student outcomes” (p. 11). This line of thinking indicates that an increase in faculty involvement will require buy-in not just from faculty, but from administrators and student affairs professionals as well.

In addition to miscommunication about whether faculty want to and/or have time to offer their services to the orientation process, the changing faculty structure may affect levels of faculty involvement in Orientation. Over the last 20 years, institutions have been increasingly hiring part-time faculty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Such a shift may be affecting various forms of faculty interaction with students. According to Umbach (2006), “part-time faculty interact with students less frequently... than their tenured and tenure-track peers” (p. 110). This is not to say that contingent faculty members are not invested in the success of their students; however, successful orientation programs will require the participation of these very faculty members. Therefore, institutions must strengthen ties with their part-time and tenure-track ineligible faculty if they hope to create an environment that fosters faculty-student interaction.

More generally, it is important that any efforts to involve faculty in Orientation are consistent not only with the institution’s formal mission statement, but also with its *lived mission* (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). As Kezar and Kinzie (2006) remind us, “There seems to be a synergy between the stated mission and the type of activities used to engage students on these campuses that were strong in creating student engagement” (p. 16). For faculty to be involved, institutions must encourage that involvement through their tenure and rewards system. They must also be conscious of their recruitment of faculty and the establishment of faculty expectations. If institutions adopt a mission that

focuses on teaching and student involvement, as opposed to a *publish or perish* mentality, the faculty may feel more inclined to participate in New Student Orientation.

Opportunities for Faculty Involvement

When faculty members become involved in Orientation, they offer valuable assistance in the student transition process and favorably impact the campus image. According to the National Orientation Directors Association Databank 2004 Summary Report, faculty members tend to be involved in orientation programming in two ways: 60% of institutions use faculty as academic advisers; 15% use faculty to evaluate orientation leader applicants. While faculty will continue to be involved in these traditional capacities, some creative orientation programs are discovering even more ways to involve faculty. Below we highlight several of these initiatives in hopes that other campuses may consider adopting them.

Academic Programming

For institutions at which faculty duties include formal advising, it would be quite practical to have faculty members acting as advisers on orientation day. For example, faculty at Saint Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana, serve as advisers to students during Orientation and assist students with any changes they wish to make to their schedules (Abel & Bice, 2006). Moreover, faculty can effectively serve as advisers even at institutions that employ professional advisers. At the University of Oregon, up to 100 faculty members advise students with a declared major during the orientation process and 95% of those advisers return to participate in Orientation the following year (Abel & Bice). While the precise new student course requirements may not be the domain of the faculty, professors are uniquely qualified to address questions about the content of specific courses. Faculty would also refer students to the appropriate resources when needed, further contributing to an image of the faculty as both humble and helpful.

Introducing new students to the academic community also seems well suited for faculty involvement. To do this, several schools have faculty present model classrooms. At Pennsylvania State University at DuBois, faculty collaborate with the campus learning center to provide orientation sessions on academic study skills, while faculty at the University of Oregon hold mock lectures so students can become familiar with a college-level course (Abel & Bice, 2006). Students at the University of Evansville participate in the Academic Retail Therapy Program (Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996). According to Robinson et al., "The presentation, conducted by a panel of faculty and students, includes personal and anecdotal information about academic life" (p. 57). In addition, students meet with faculty members in their respective departments as well as with orientation leaders. At Illinois State University, students are led by faculty in *Classroom 101*, what is referred to as a "simulated large lecture classroom experience

[led by a faculty member] that helps students learn about the expectations of being a college student” (p. 57).

Another way to connect incoming students with faculty is to utilize those faculty members already tied to first-year seminar courses in orientation events. At Saint Joseph’s College, faculty members who teach a first-year seminar also serve as an orientation leader to their class (Abel & Bice, 2006). Summer reading programs are another way to merge Orientation and the first-year seminar. Cox (2006) notes that “more than 40 institutions now require some (if not all) of their incoming first-year students to participate in small seminar discussions with faculty about an assigned reading” (p. 8). Often these groups can be divided by first-year seminar sections. Such groupings not only give the students an opportunity to meet with their instructor for the first time, but also provide for meaningful faculty-student interaction before classes begin. This type of involvement, in addition to fostering a positive campus climate, gives students direct access to the professor in a formal, yet relaxed, environment.

Social Programming

While formal orientation activities may best match faculty expectations, some institutions have taken efforts to encourage more informal, casual interaction between faculty members and students. These activities parallel recent findings suggesting that faculty-student interaction of any kind, even incidental contact, can be valuable to students (Cox & Orehovec, in press). In an effort to move beyond the classroom into a more casual atmosphere, some orientation programs request their faculty to play host to dinner events (Abel & Bice, 2006). The dinners may be held in a professor’s home, on campus, or off campus at a local restaurant. At Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, these gatherings provide an informal setting where students can begin to feel comfortable talking with their professors.

There are also opportunities for students to interact with faculty during move-in day. Faculty can be given such roles as greeters or helping parents and students move into their residence halls. These activities give faculty members a chance to answer parents’ questions as well as meet students in an informal environment. Furthermore, parents and peers assisting with the move-in process are able to see faculty outside of the academic setting, further reinforcing the notion of a campus culture which includes faculty-student interaction. For this interaction to be conveyed as fluid and natural, student affairs professionals may ask faculty members what role they wish to play on move-in day. Some faculty may choose to be greeters, while others may want to assist the students and their families with moving their things to their new rooms. Regardless of their preference, by establishing a set and known role, more faculty members may be willing to assist.

Finally, it is now common for institutions to have an activities/involvement fair during

welcome week. Many schools also require that student groups have a faculty sponsor/adviser. In such cases, faculty sponsors can be invited to join their organizations at the fair. The presence of faculty at these events makes two distinct contributions. First, it provides opportunities for new students to interact directly with professors. Second, it allows new students to see faculty members interacting with returning students. Witnessing such positive interactions can contribute to new students' perception of the campus culture as one in which faculty and students can develop positive and meaningful relationships outside of class.

Conclusion

By no means will these examples of faculty involvement in Orientation prove successful on all campuses. Furthermore, the ideal collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals will not occur overnight. The purpose of this article, however, is to show that faculty participation in Orientation is beneficial, possible, and critical. Orientation professionals should seek out faculty to participate, as students will ultimately form opinions about the campus culture from their experiences at Orientation. Regardless of the manner in which the faculty is involved, any positive interactions between professors and students at Orientation can contribute to students' ultimate success in college.

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