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New Student Orientation

Community College Orientation Basics: How to structure a new student orientation program

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Community college environments are often diverse and dynamic places. The American Association of Community Colleges estimates that there are over 6.6 million credit students enrolled in the 1,195 community colleges across the nation. The average age of these community college students is 29. Seventeen percent are single parents, over half are employed full-time, and almost 40 percent are first-generation college students. Indeed, community college students enter higher education with unique needs and complex, hectic lives. Thus, outreach initiatives, such as new student orientation programs, are critical to maximizing these students' opportunities for success.

As the student population in community colleges continues to change and grow, the economic resources available to these schools continue to shrink. Therefore, planning and implementation of an orientation program becomes an enormous challenge.

This outline is provided as a starting point for those charged with developing or revising an orientation program. Answering these questions will set parameters within which a successful student orientation program can be built.

I. Assess the institutional view. Ask the following questions:

Where is the orientation program on the institution's list of priorities?

- How will an orientation program fit within the mission of the college?
- Has a mission statement already been written for the orientation program?
- What is the recent history of orientation at the college?
- Has a new directive been given regarding orientation?

What is the main purpose or goal for the new (or revised) orientation program?

- Does the program seek to welcome students to the institution?
- Is a goal to provide a foundation for retention?
- Is a goal to register as many students as possible in an efficient group setting?
- Are students to be offered an understandable introduction to the academic community?

What resources is the institution willing to allocate for orientation?

- What funds are available to achieve the purpose of the orientation?
- Is there an available grant that could supplement the program?
- Who are the human resources on hand that can assist?
- What types of services and facilities will be given to orientation?
- Are there certain items that will be made available to the students?

II. Consult the experts.**What do students want and need from an orientation program?**

- What specific academic issues are of the greatest concern for entering students?

What has CAS (Council for the Advancement of Standards for Higher Education) established for orientation programs?

- How do the national standards and guidelines for orientation programs coincide with the institutional view for the program?

What NODA (National Orientation Directors Association) publications are available to assist with the task?

- How do the latest trends and issues in orientation impact the institution's purpose?

III . Build the program. Using what was learned from the institutional assessment and consultations with experts, put the program together.

How will orientations be scheduled?

- How many orientations will be run?
- How large will the sessions be?
- How long will they be?
- Over what calendar period will they run?

What topic areas will be addressed?

- What college personnel will students meet during the program?
- How will the academic structure, requirements, and policies be presented?
- What will students learn about campus services, activities, and events?
- When will students register for classes and take care of business matters?

What formats will be used?

- Will different orientations be developed to serve different populations?
- Are some orientations scheduled to be longer/shorter than others?
- Could the program be offered online?
- Can the format be adapted to small groups or one-on-one?

The following are examples of how orientations were developed in two community colleges: Oklahoma City Community College and Johnson County Community College

Oklahoma City Community College History

Founded in 1972, Oklahoma City Community College is a single-campus, urban community college with an annual enrollment of approximately 20,000 students. Students may choose from 44 university parallel degree programs, 46 applied associate degree programs, and 21 certificate programs.

Over the years new student orientation has taken on a number of formats and names. Prior to the most recent enhancements, new student orientation was a single-day event the Saturday prior to both the fall and spring semesters. Students could formally “enroll” or sign up for the event at the point of registration, but all new students were invited via mailings. The format of new student orientation varied slightly from year to year, but generally included an opening speaker and small group sessions on topics such as study skills and financial aid.

Planning

As a result of a consulting visit targeting the initiation of programs to improve retention, new student orientation was targeted as an area for enhancement. A committee of student services staff and faculty members was formed to plan changes to new student orientation. In planning, this committee took three primary steps:

- Current research on best practices for new student orientation was reviewed and discussed.
- Current institutional practices were systematically analyzed in terms of what the committee felt was and was not working.
- Resources, staffing, potential alternative formats for new student orientation and other related issues were also discussed.

Student needs were assessed. New students were asked to complete a survey asking them what information was most important one month prior to classes beginning, and what was most critical the Saturday before classes began. Calls were also made to students who began one semester prior to ask what they wish they had known prior to beginning their first semester. It is important to note that demographic data was collected with the surveys and no significant difference was found among the various student cohorts in term of their needs.

The New Program’s Structure

New Student Orientation at OCCC is now a one-time 2 ½ hour session. Sessions run throughout the two months prior to each new semester at various times and days. Each session hosts approximately 20 students. Students enroll in NSO 0500 as a non-credit, no-cost course at the time of advisement and registration. The program remains voluntary. Approximately 55% of all in-coming students attend a new student orientation session. A full-time professional staff member was hired to oversee the program, as were two part-time peer leaders. The new staff is housed in the Student Life Office. The sessions are presented by these three staff members using a slide show, video clips, and interactive activities. Topics reviewed during the session are built directly from the results of the student surveys and include: faculty academic expectations, success tips from current students, parking, financial aid, payments, student e-mail, time management, study skills, note-taking, selecting a major, campus resources, on-line services and a general campus tour.

In addition, the Saturday event prior to the first day of classes has been maintained as a celebration event. The event, now called Opening Day, is a come and go for students and their families throughout

the afternoon. Student service offices are open and all new students are invited via a postcard to participate. Academic divisions each have tables for student questions, a computer lab is opened to help students get acquainted with their on-line courses, and faculty and staff are available to help students find their individual classes. Additionally, a 45 minute family orientation session is held during Opening Day and is lead by the College President and the Vice-President for Enrollment and Student Services. Again, the event structure was built directly from student feedback on the surveys.

Assessment

Following each new student orientation session a survey is administered that asks the students to rate their knowledge of the various topics covered prior to and following the session. This data is used to enhance the presentation.

In addition, all students who attend a new student orientation session are tracked in terms of their GPA, persistence and retention. Enhancements to new student orientation were implemented in the summer of 2006 and, although there have been slight variations in the data, generally students who attend a new student orientation session show an approximately six percent higher persistence rate than those who do not attend.

Johnson County Community College

Orientation in a Success Center Environment: Hourly Orientation

The Success Center at Johnson County Community College (JCCC) is an integrative one-stop center which includes the Counseling Center, Career Services, Access Services, Financial Aid, Admissions, Registration, and the Testing Center. Collaboratively, services are provided for over 18,000 students in a suburban setting with 56 degree programs, 108 certificate programs, and over 200 transfer programs for regional colleges and universities.

History

Over the past 39 years, orientation at JCCC has evolved and gone in many different directions. Originally, orientation was provided individually by the counselors as the student 'walked in' the door, then JCCC moved to the use of pre-advising student development assistants who provided individual orientations. Next we had an organized ½ day session for students called the Orient Express which included orientation and registration in the summer.

When the JCCC Success Center opened orientation became sessions offered two times a day, with an on-line orientation option. Currently, we offer orientation hourly, with an online orientation option.

Development

In 2004, we decided that we needed to research alternative types of orientation programs. The system in place was a twice daily (and 3:00) sessions which averaged 30 – 35 students a month. Additionally, students could access JCCC's online orientation. In spite of both offerings, a majority of students did not attend sessions or do the online orientation. We knew there had to be a better way to reach our students. We also knew that the financial situation at the college was not going to accommodate new staff, facilities, or resources.

Since the Success Center is integrated with all Student Services departments, we created an orientation task force to brainstorm options. In consideration of our millennial student body, whose main mode of operating seems to be 'in the moment with an instant response,' we decided to offer orientations sessions every hour in the Success Center. We set-up a conference room to accommodate up to 12 students, updated our online orientation to use both Internet and PowerPoint within the sessions, and trained our Success Center staff and student workers to present the program.

The current hourly system was implemented July 2005, with an immediate 300% increase in student attendance. We now average 1200 students per month in the heavy summer registration periods, and over 300 a month during the rest of the year. Student evaluations have been very positive, with the 'small group' and the 'individual assistance' indicated almost unanimously.

We know we have improved our system, but we also know that we are still not reaching many students who could benefit from an early interaction with JCCC. We have recently initiated a new orientation task force to consider creating a mandatory orientation system based upon student development concepts. The authors encourage you to contact them if you have questions or need additional information.

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New Student Orientation

- **Overview** of the issues surrounding new student orientation
 - [Preparing Academic Advisors for Orientation Programs](#)
 - [Reorienting Themselves](#) via Inside Higher Ed

References & Resources:

[American Association of Community Colleges](#)

[National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition](#)

[National Orientation Directors Association](#)

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