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ORIENTATION PROGRAMMING FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

An Institutional Imperative

Although colleges and universities are increasingly expanding their graduate programs, many institutions continue to focus too little attention on orienting new graduate students after they arrive on campus. Orientation programming at the graduate level, however, can serve many functions such as reducing anxieties, familiarizing students with new academic challenges, and orienting graduate students' spouses. While serving these functions, orientation programming also can heighten student retention, satisfaction, and success. The authors offer several guidelines for developing programs responsive to the diverse needs of graduate students.

In recent years, many institutions of higher education have been devoting increasing amounts of energy and money to the recruitment of top quality graduate students. One reason for this renewed interest in graduate education is that institutional ratings are typically based on the quality of graduate programs. Therefore, as a means of enhancing national or regional visibility, some colleges and universities have decided to focus heightened attention on graduate education.

In addition to improving visibility, there are clear economic implications associated with the enhancement of graduate education. Specifically, graduate students are actively recruited by many institutions to fill the vacant seats created by declines in the traditional 18- to 22-year age range. Added impetus for recruiting comes from administrators' awareness that state funding formulae quite frequently provide greater weighting (and, therefore, increased funding) for graduate versus undergraduate student credit hours. Furthermore, graduate education is typically linked with research productivity, which is tied directly to external funding. Thus, one could speculate that the by-products of an increased emphasis on graduate education are additional funding as well as visibility for the institution.

While institutions recognize that graduate students represent one mechanism for maintaining institutional vitality, these institutions generally fail to provide support services for them after they arrive on campus. For instance, undergraduate student orientation programs are almost universal in higher education while such programs for graduate students are rare

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indeed; and those that are conducted are typically not comprehensive in nature. Ethically or fiscally, however, higher education institutions can no longer afford to discriminate between undergraduate and graduate students in terms of the attention paid to them in the first few months of their matriculation at an institution. As Noel (1985) suggested, support and assistance to freshmen students during their first few weeks in college are likely to play an especially important role in heightening their satisfaction, retention, and success. Because the same situation is very likely true for graduate students, comprehensive orientation programs for them can and must be provided.

Why are orientation programs so important? First, it is evident that orientation programs for employees help them to feel confident that they are part of a forward-moving organization that cares about them. Well-conceived orientation programs also give people "immediate access to the information and resources they need to function" (Klubnik, 1987, p. 46) effectively and efficiently within the organization. Perhaps these ideas about employee orientation should be applied both to graduate and to undergraduate student orientation.

There are several other reasons for developing comprehensive graduate student orientation programs. For instance, an orientation program can help to reduce students' fears and apprehensions about the graduate school experience. Obviously, incoming graduate students share with their undergraduate counterparts a fear of the unknown. Both types of students face the task of adapting to a new environment. In the case of graduate students, this fear may be compounded by their lack of understanding about the differences between graduate and undergraduate education. Many new graduate students believe they will have to risk their physical and emotional health to meet exceedingly high academic expectations. In this regard, there is a concomitant fear of failure that can heighten student distress. Furthermore, for graduate students who are adult learners (i.e., re-entry students), additional anxiety may stem from their concern over potential isolation as a result of their age (Astin, 1976). An orientation program that reduces these fears and anxieties by providing a more informed, realistic perspective can enable incoming graduate students to cope more effectively with the pressures accompanying graduate education. In so doing, such a program has the probable effect of heightening retention rates and enhancing scholastic endeavors.

In addition to allaying the fears of graduate students, an orientation program can assist them in meeting new academic demands, resolving issues associated with separation and loss, and establishing new relationships (Knott & Daher, 1978). Although the investigators who identified these tasks were working with undergraduates, their ideas seem to be just as applicable to beginning graduate students. Unlike their undergraduate counterparts, however, many graduate students are confronted with the additional challenge of assuming teaching or research duties. Because many students have very limited (if any) experience in teaching or conducting research, an orientation program which also provides information in these areas can be beneficial to new graduate students.

An orientation program can assist graduate students in yet another way: by thoroughly familiarizing them with departmental routines and giving them a sense of what it is like to be active, integral members of their departments. Orientation programs can also help them understand that the university is part of a larger community and that there are a number of community services available to them. Lastly, involvement of spouses and partners in orientation activities can serve as a means of acclimating those people to the new environment.

Bowling Green State University (BGSU) is one of only a few higher education institutions that annually operates an extensive, multifaceted graduate student orientation program. (For detailed information about the process involved and samples of activities conducted, see ERIC

Document No. ED 285 472.) BGSU is a state institution with a student population in excess of 17,000, and a teaching staff of more than 725 full-time faculty. BGSU offers more than 170 undergraduate degree programs, 19 associate degree programs, 76 master's programs, 4 specialist programs, and 14 doctoral programs. Approximately 2,500 graduate students attend BGSU, of which 55 percent are women, 4 percent are black, and about 1 percent are Asian and Hispanic.

To prepare these students to begin their graduate studies, BGSU offers an orientation program immediately prior to the beginning of the fall semester each year. Through the process of planning, implementing, and reviewing this program, a number of factors or guiding principles have been identified as essential to the success of a graduate student orientation program. Knowledge of these principles may assist student personnel colleagues in implementing or expanding graduate student orientation programs at other institutions.

● ***Develop a comprehensive program that focuses on professional and personal development.***

Recent investigators have recognized the diverse needs and concerns of new undergraduates and have suggested that programs be designed to meet these needs (Kramer & Washburn, 1983; Miller & Jones, 1981; Sagaria, Higginson & White, 1980). Similarly, Heretick and Doyle (1983) indicated that re-entry students are confronted with numerous challenges upon beginning college and seem in need of comprehensive, holistic orientation programming. Graduate students, like their undergraduate counterparts, are confronted with changes in several life domains. While most of these changes cannot be avoided, appropriate interventions may minimize their disruptive effect (Goplerud, 1980). Orientation programming provides an ideal context in which such interventions can occur. Orientation programming should be based on explicit goal statements which reflect the many ways in which graduate students will be challenged. Examples of such goal statements include:

- Acquaint graduate assistants and teaching fellows with their instructional responsibilities and identify principles of effective teaching that should be observed in the classroom setting.

Familiarize graduate students with their departmental programs.

Assist graduate students in developing personal and professional support networks.

- Introduce graduate students to university services and community resources.
- Acquaint spouses and partners of graduate students with the university and the community.

● ***Be enthusiastic and innovative but know your limits.***

Enthusiasm on the part of the orientation programmers is infectious and can have considerable value when appropriately channelled (i.e., in motivating orientation staff members and graduate student participants). Such enthusiasm, however, should not lead to the establishment of unrealistic goals and expectations. Given the fact that there is so much to know, it is possible to overwhelm students with an excessive amount of information — an error easily made by overly zealous orientation organizers (Klostermann & Merseal, 1978).

- *Select only highly qualified staff members.*

No matter how well conceived the orientation goals are, implementing an effective program requires the concerted effort of a large number of people. In addition to a director and assistant director, key staff may include student coordinators responsible for developing specific aspects of the program (e.g., research, instruction, personal/professional development) and orientation leaders. The coordinators can best be viewed as "program specialists" who formulate methods for accomplishing goals in different areas, while the leaders simultaneously serve as guides, mentors, and morale boosters for their students.

- *Make sure your staff members know what they're doing and why.*

Regardless of how qualified and motivated the orientation staff, maximum use of their talents and energies requires considerable training effort. Training sessions serve multiple functions, including familiarizing members of the staff with specific details of the orientation program and the roles they are to play in it. Besides increasing the staff's enthusiasm about the program, training sessions encourage staff members to become better acquainted and to offer alternative ways of approaching situations.

- *Provide a structural framework but encourage creativity in programming.*

In implementing an orientation program, flexibility is an important ingredient for success. Being flexible entails recognizing that the same objectives can (and often must) be accomplished by employing different means. For instance, one orientation leader's way of disseminating information, conveying enthusiasm, or demonstrating concern may differ greatly from that of another leader.

- *Determine if your program makes a difference: evaluate, evaluate, evaluate.*

A rigorous evaluation process provides those responsible for the program with an assessment of the extent to which orientation goals have been realized. It identifies weak links in the program, and enables the staff to provide personnel with feedback regarding their performance. Finally, evaluations, if similar from year to year, facilitate comparisons of past and present programs.

- *Keep records in the format of a program manual.*

Such a manual should contain the following types of materials: position descriptions for all staff members, a timeline for planning the program, staff selection and training materials, information about departmentally sponsored activities, evaluation forms and results, the actual printed program, and the year-end report. With this information, future staff members will not waste their time and efforts discovering anew what does and does not work.

- *Obtain a firm commitment to the program from university administrators.*

If key university administrators such as the university president, the vice president for student affairs, and the graduate dean firmly believe in the program's merits, they will be more inclined to allocate the required human and fiscal resources. Such overt support can heighten the involvement of various academic departments and university offices and can serve to increase the extent to which participants view the program as a worthwhile endeavor.

- *Require the attendance of stipend holders but encourage all new graduate students to participate.*

To ensure that graduate students are prepared to render teaching and research services, the graduate student orientation program is a logical vehicle for accomplishing this task by offering a forum to address assistantship duties. When a graduate orientation program serves this function, it seems quite reasonable to mandate the participation of research and teaching assistants. Certainly non-stipend students can also benefit from this exposure, and they should be invited to participate, also.

Recognize that orientation planning is a year-round activity.

The director should view the ending of each year's orientation program as the time to begin preparations for the following year. If sufficient effort has been invested in the first 10 months of the year, the last 8 or 9 weeks can be an exciting rather than a frustrating time for those involved.

Keep in touch with the participants after the program ends.

Holding follow-up activities such as a group discussion or a social event several weeks after the end of the orientation program can serve a number of purposes. First, it can afford participants the opportunity to ask their orientation leaders questions which have arisen during their first weeks in graduate school. Secondly, it can give staff members the chance to ascertain what aspects of the fall program were most and least helpful to participants. Thirdly, follow-up activities provide participants with a sense of continued support from the institution.

- *Involve spouses and partners in the orientation process.*

Although the spouses and partners of graduate students do not have to be extensively involved in orientation activities, the institution should attempt to convey to them that their continuing support is recognized and appreciated. Activities such as organized campus tours, invitations to social events, short sessions on the impact graduate school has on relationships, and the opportunity to attend the personal and professional development seminars will go a long way in making the spouses and partners feel good about this new venture.

SUMMARY

Institutions can no longer assume that graduate students (who are typically adults) do not need assistance or support as they enter a new stage in their personal and professional lives. Indeed, institutions that demonstrate their commitment to graduate education through orientation programs are likely to have more satisfied, highly productive graduate students than those who recruit them and contact them only when tuition is due. Orientation programming for graduate students does make a difference — and a positive one.

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