

# Increasing Participation in Student Governance Through First-Year Programs

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*New student orientation programs are important components of institutions delivering a set of expectations to their new students. These programs and subsequent first-year experience courses convey both practical strategies for surviving on campus, but also convey a sense of institutional norms about behavior, including involvement. The current study explored the practical strategies orientation directors perceived to be effective in increasing student involvement in self-governance activities.*

College orientation programs for new students are designed to fulfill a variety of purposes (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003). They provide study skill instruction, help develop social support networks, and play the important role of teaching new students the logistics of their new homes (Smith & Brackin, 2003). They also play a vital role in teaching new students about what the college or university expects from the student body. Although much of this work is centered on academic success, through the structure, content, and implied meaning of much orientation content, the institution sends a strong message about what it expects from students on campus (Haden, 2004).

The rise, growth, and deeply rooted establishment of orientation programs, particularly extended orientation programs, comes at a time when student apathy toward engagement in shared governance is at a low point. Although the research conducted by the National Survey of Student Survey Engagement profiles tremendous advantages to being involved in the social and academic fabric of campus, student involvement in governance has continued to lose its once-strong footing.

Student involvement in governance activities grew dramatically during the 1960s and early 1970s, fueled to a large extent by unifying social issues. In the 1980s, however, along with the rise of the individual benefit of higher education, student governance bodies began to lose their unity as issues of student apathy toward governance grew (Miles, 1997). The 1990s and 2000s have continued this trend, with student governance now fitting into one of two dominant models. The first is that of a narrowly focused student governance body that tends to serve student organizations and is a form of coordinating activities and fee allocations.

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The other is a broader body that focuses on a sporadic and often uncoordinated activities from year to year (Miller & Nadler, 2006).

With such a continuum of governance bodies, higher education must define what it wants out of shared governance participation. If higher education institutions maintain a functionary role of preparing individuals for society and life in democratic communities, then enhancing student governance activities is a direct obligation of the academy. This study was subsequently developed to explore how orientation programs might serve as a conduit for increasing student involvement in shared governance activities. These findings are important to both student affairs professionals looking for practical strategies to increase student engagement and involvement, but also to all those concerned about the idea that higher education has a role in preparing citizens for their role in society.

## Setting of the Study

New student orientation programs are designed to develop both a sense of expectation for the institution and the tools for students to be successful while in college (Twale, 1989). These conceptions of new student orientation result in a variety of methods for orientation programs, including short, intense summer visits that focus on the technical aspects of advising and registration, to the longer, multiple day programs that invest heavily in developing social support networks (Ward-Roof & Hatch, 2003).

This combination of social interaction development along with expectation formation results in an experience for new college students (and very possibly transfer students) ideal for encouraging involvement (Dannells & Wilson, 2003). As new students arrive on campus, they look for opportunities to engage in at a variety of levels, both academically and socially. By building activities, experiences, and opportunities into new student orientation programs, students can become engaged and develop the habits of interaction and involvement that will last throughout their collegiate careers (Goodfellow, Cresswell-Yeager, & Felty, 2005).

The same ideology that drives participation in a democratic society can exist in a reflection of that society. In the current discussion, the framework is that college and university settings are broadly interpreted as training grounds for participation in democratic, civic life. As such, components of the collegiate environment need to be embedded in that experience to prepare individuals for the life they will be expected to lead upon their departure from campus. The parallelism also entails that incentive for participation in democratic society is largely value based, and that collegiate governance participation is indeed value based as well. However, the habits, trends, and behaviors of participation in democracy are rooted in predispositions of activism and involvement, and if colleges and universities can find tools or other strategies (such as AmeriCorps or service learning programs) for creating a level of involvement, then they can be successful conduits for creating more participatory, and subsequently more accurate, democracies.

Therefore, the present study is grounded in the conception that early engagement of college students in a variety of activities, particularly student self-governance bodies, will result in longer term benefits to society and the democratic form of government. Specifically, institutions must look at the activities that have the potential to peak interest and move students to the point of action, engaging in involvement. Through new student orientation programs, where expectations and cultural norms are conveyed to the society's (college's) new citizens (new students), certain activities might result in greater involvement and investment. This study explored what people who run these programs perceive to be effective tools for garnering interest and involvement. Further, while findings are immensely meaningful to those concerned about democracy and decision-making, particularly on campus, this study is also the first step toward testing models that might result in better or more efficient means for developing engagement.

## Research Methods

The data collection instrument was adapted from Miles' (1997) Delphi study of techniques to engage students in self-governance organizations. In her work, she surveyed student government leaders who were nominated by their senior student affairs officers, asking them to identify and come to agreement on strategies for increasing student government participation. The survey instrument was modified to reflect a specific focus on what can be done to attract first-year students to participate in governance activities, specifically in orientation and transition programs. The modified instrument was reviewed by an expert panel of five orientation directors and five student government advisors. Following modifications for clarity and specificity, and the inclusion of an introductory section, the instrument was distributed electronically to 350 orientation directors and coordinators around the United States. The data collection initially took place in the spring of 2007, with several follow-up e-mail messages extending into the early summer of 2007.

## Findings

A total of 162 usable responses were ultimately received for inclusion in data analysis, representing a 46.28% response rate. Responses were received over a six week period of time, and late responding surveys were compared with overall response rates from early responders, with no significant difference identified between early and late-responders ( $f=.0027$ ). Despite the low response rate, the high number of responses was considered appropriate for electronic survey data collection.

Of the respondents, the majority represented comprehensive universities ( $n = 80$ ; 49% of respondents), followed by 27% of the respondents ( $n=43$ ) who represented research intensive/extensive universities, and 24% of the respondents ( $n=39$ ) who represented private liberal arts colleges. As shown in Table 1, the

majority of respondents from private liberal arts colleges indicated that they utilized short, pre-semester based orientation programs. These might be one to two days in length and occur just before the start of the fall semester. Comparatively, the majority of comprehensive and research university orientation programs were short, summer programs. Respondents were also asked to indicate typical orientation activities, representing in this study the context or environments where student governance opportunities might be made visible. Private liberal arts college respondents indicated that they typically included advising, registration, and social activities, and to a lesser extent, academic skill instruction. This pattern was consistent among the response patterns for other types of institution's responses, where both comprehensive and research university orientation directors indicated that advising, registration, social support network development all were common, with fewer indicating that academic skill development and career or major declaration programs were present in orientation.

The next section of the survey included 15 strategies for getting first-year students involved in governance activities. The strategies were the results of the Miles' (1997) dissertation study, and orientation directors were asked to rate each one on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, where 5=Strong Agreement that the strategy would be effective in garnering greater new student involvement, progressing to 1=Strongly Disagree that the strategy would be effective in getting new students involved.

The average rating for all institutional groups on all items was 4.06, suggesting an overall level of agreement that the strategies could be effective in increasing participation in self-governance activities. This rating also validates the Miles (1997) study that used open-ended questions to create consensus on a battery of tools that could be used to improve participation. The liberal arts colleges provided the highest overall ratings for the 15 strategies, with a grand mean of 4.18, followed by comprehensive university orientation directors mean of 4.02, and research university orientation directors' mean of 4.01.

Overall, respondents agreed most strongly that the way to increase student involvement in governance activities is to have administrators respect the decisions of student governments (overall mean of 4.55; see Table 2). Implied in this strategy is that first-year students will come to understand and value the culture of meaningful shared governance, and that this in turn serves as the strongest impetus to involvement in governance activities. The second most strongly rated strategy was to emphasize the importance of student governance positions (mean = 4.36), suggesting that the visible importance carries both prestige and a feeling that these are meaningful positions to direct the future of the college. The third highest rated strategy was the demonstration of the past accomplishments of the student government (mean = 4.23).

Respondents from each institutional type had the highest overall averages for the strategy of having administrators respect the decisions of the student government and the second highest overall mean rating for emphasizing the importance of each position. Both liberal arts and research university orientation

directors had their third highest average for the strategy of demonstrating past accomplishments, and the comprehensive university orientation directors' third highest average was for the strategy of creating a student government structure that accomplishes its goals.

An analysis of variance also was employed to explore significant differences between group ratings, based on institutional typology, and utilizing a Tukey post hoc procedure. Two statistically significant differences were identified, both between the liberal arts and research university orientation directors. In both instances, liberal arts college respondents had significantly higher ratings than research university respondents, although in both cases both mean scores represented agreement or higher levels of response. The differences were for the strategies of respecting the decisions of student government (liberal arts respondents' mean = 4.85, research university respondents' mean = 4.28), and creating a student government structure that accomplishes its goals (liberal arts respondents' mean = 4.70, research university respondents' mean = 4.00).

## Discussion

New student orientation and transition programs increasingly have been seen as a panacea for many of higher education's challenges, including retention, developmental education, encouraging future alumni giving, and as discussed here, as a tool to prompt engagement. Although the Council for the Advancement of Standards provides a general framework for what can and should be included in orientation programs, there are growing trends to either reduce orientation to its most essential functions, or alternatively, to expand programs in multiple dimensions (such as overnight camps) and include additional supporting coursework. The result is a quilt-like approach to orientation and new student programs that lacks a tight focus on expectations and outcomes. This lack of clarity of programs also allows for those interested in student welfare to explore what could or might be included to help students be assured of success in higher education.

The current study was subsequently designed to explore how orientation and transitional programs might go about fashioning activities or implementing strategies to enhance involvement. Involvement was operationally defined for the purpose of this study as student government or self-governance activities, a function virtually every college campus employs. Findings suggest that it is the perceived importance and credibility of the opportunity that results in involvement or increased engagement and not the amount of available opportunities for involvement that makes a difference for students. Orientation directors at all types of institutions agreed most strongly that administrative respect for student governance decisions is what will result in heightened involvement (insofar as first-year programs are considered). Additionally, they agreed least strongly that increasing opportunities for student involvement on faculty and staff committees would result in more involvement. This means that the next step to be taken to increase engagement is to explore more deeply the notion of appealing to

what is seen as important or of high value to students.

Appealing to student values is consistent with the literature on governance in general, and that involvement is a direct result of what touches on the important things in an individual's life (Miller, 2003). The meaningful result of this is that those working with college students must look at how students value different aspects of their collegiate experience, and what opportunities are aligned with those values. Similarly, orientation programs will be most effective when they take into consideration not only the immediate transitional needs of students, but also what impacts their deeper values and beliefs about who they are and what they expect and need from the higher education setting. Operationally, this might mean looking beyond training that has only immediate impact and what will provide a long-term foundation for the student's success in college.

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TABLE 1

**Description of Survey Respondents (N = 162)**

Strategy	LA <sup>a</sup> n=39	Comp <sup>b</sup> n=80	Research <sup>c</sup> n=43
Predominant orientation style			
Short, summer (1-2 days)	11	43	19
Short, pre-semester (2 days or less)	25	25	15
Long, pre-semester (3+ days)	3	12	9
Typical orientation activities (all that apply)			
Advising/registration	38	76	39
Social	39	74	40
Academic skill	26	78	34
Career/major interest	10	62	31

Note. <sup>a</sup>LA = Liberal Arts College, <sup>b</sup>Comp = Comprehensive University, and <sup>c</sup>Research = Research University.

TABLE 2

## Ratings of Strategies to Increase Participation

Strategy	LA <sup>a</sup>	Comp <sup>b</sup>	Res <sup>c</sup>	All <sup>d</sup>	Sig Dif <sup>e</sup>
Establish a relationship between the student government and student organizations.	3.69	3.87	4.10	3.88	.2109
Provide a consistent time and a consistent location for student government meetings.	3.82	3.80	3.96	3.84	.6132
Give the students a feeling of ownership.	4.61	4.00	4.01	4.14	.5621
Emphasize the importance of the position each student holds.	4.75	4.25	4.24	4.36	.3233
Keep the student media involved and interested.	3.99	3.67	3.89	3.80	.2009
Encourage new student involvement through demonstrating past accomplishments of the student government.	4.75	4.17	4.22	4.23	.0989
Make students aware of options and roles available through the student government.	3.96	3.99	4.02	3.99	.4908
Demonstrate student government effectiveness so others will want to join.	4.11	4.00	4.20	4.07	.5167
Publicize student government meetings and activities.	3.67	3.75	3.60	3.69	.9673
Create a positive image on campus for the student leaders.	4.25	3.81	3.90	3.93	.4766
Administrators should respect decisions of student governments.	4.85*	4.56	4.28*	4.55	.0499*
Create a student government structure that accomplishes its goals.	4.70*	4.24	4.00*	3.66	.0323*
Increase student representation on faculty and staff committees.	3.42	3.78	3.63	3.65	.4309
Foster cooperation between the student government and the institution's administration.	4.26	4.19	4.08	4.17	.1926



TABLE 2 (CONT.)

**Ratings of Strategies to Increase Participation**

Strategy	LA <sup>a</sup>	Comp <sup>b</sup>	Res <sup>c</sup>	All <sup>d</sup>	Sig Dif <sup>e</sup>
Be visible to first-year students.	4.00	4.22	4.14	4.14	.8726

*Note.* \*statistically significantly different at the .05, where \* represents significant difference using a Tukey post hoc.

<sup>a</sup>LA = Liberal Arts College.

<sup>b</sup>Comp = Comprehensive University.

<sup>c</sup>Res = Research University.

<sup>d</sup>All = All Institutions.

<sup>e</sup>Sig Dif = Significant Difference.