

# Orientation Shadow Day: An Educational Experience for Graduate Students Preparing for Careers in Student Affairs

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*This article examines the importance of creating additional opportunities and experiences for graduate students in student affairs preparation programs to facilitate greater understanding of the student affairs profession. One easily accessible and comprehensive opportunity is the orientation program. West Chester University created and implemented an Orientation Shadow Day for graduate students enrolled in the higher education counseling/student affairs program. Through participation in the shadow experience and subsequent reflection, graduate students reported significant learning about the orientation function, the complexity of the orientation planning process, and the diversity of services and resources offered through the division of student affairs. Suggestions of additional means to assist graduate students in learning more about orientation both in and out of the classroom setting are included.*

## Introduction

Since the publication of the “Student Personnel Point of View”, the student affairs profession has responded to the call to orient students to campus and to college life (American Council on Education, 1937, 1949; Komives & Woodard, 2003). As colleges and universities become more diverse, administrators must expand the scope of student participation in orientation beyond the traditional first-year, first-time student (NODA, 2011). For example, orientation programs now include transfer, returning adult, and distance-education students. They also include programs for specific groups of students (e.g., honors, graduate students, veterans, etc.) as well as parents and families (Overland, Rentz, & Sarnicki, 2011). Orientation programs differ in timing, scope, content, activities, and even the intended messages (Overland, et al., 2011). One message, though, is consistent—new students need information to succeed. The successful transition of new students to our institutions is paramount to our work as student affairs practitioners (Boykin, Hower, Kepler, Marling, Pitman, & Walters, 2013; Barefoot, 2000; Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996).

Understanding the organization and administration of student affairs is critical for graduate students preparing for careers in the field (Henning & Komives, 2012). Learning about the orientation program is an ideal way for graduate students to understand more about the organization and administration of student affairs as

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well as the complexity of colleges and universities. Our graduate students come from a diversity of institutions and experiences (Henning & Komives, 2012). We cannot assume they all have the same knowledge, skills, understanding, and abilities (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009). To be well-prepared entry-level professionals, it is critical for graduate students to learn and build human relations and management skills, develop and enhance competencies, and continue their identity development as student affairs practitioners (ACPA/NASPA, 2011; Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2004; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006).

Learning about and engaging in the orientation function is one way to help graduate students develop skills in many of the professional competency areas for student affairs practitioners, specifically in the areas of student learning and development, leadership, and advising and helping (ACPA/NASPA, 2011). By design, orientation programs provide new students with an introduction to the university, a familiarity with campus policies and procedures, an understanding of the available services and resources, pathways to involvement and ways to become engaged in their learning experiences both in and out of the classroom setting. Graduate students can learn about this essential student affairs function by observing the orientation program at their new institution. Observing orientation can help their learning in a variety of ways.

First, they can learn more about the institution in which they are enrolled. Although many graduate students most likely participated in their own undergraduate orientation program, the general content may be a distant memory, especially for older graduate students.

Second, as practitioners present information to new students and families, graduate students can discover information about many of the functional areas in student affairs. The exposure to the diversity of opportunities may challenge graduate students' preconceived ideas of their intended career path and inspire them to explore new areas of student affairs.

Third, as graduate students view the orientation program with a new perspective, they can gain an appreciation of the complexity of planning and implementing a program with so many moving parts and invested stakeholders. The orientation planning and implementation process can serve as a good lesson on collaboration with all divisions on campus (ACPA/NASPA, 2011; Kezar, 2003).

Finally, orientation is one function where student affairs and academic affairs must work together to successfully transition new students to the institution. Understanding the need and developing skills to bridge the academic and student affairs divide is an essential learning component for graduate students in professional preparation programs (Kezar, 2003).

## **West Chester University Higher Education Counseling/Student Affairs Program**

West Chester University is a public, regional, master's degree granting institution located in southeastern Pennsylvania, and it is part of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. In 2013, the undergraduate enrollment was approximately 13,711, and the graduate enrollment was 2,134 ("West Chester University," 2014). The student affairs preparation program is housed in the

Department of Counselor Education, a CACREP accredited program. Students in the higher education counseling/student affairs (HEC/SA) track enroll in three content specialty classes (Introduction to Student Affairs, Theories of American Student Development, Leadership/Management of Student Affairs) and 700 hours of supervised field experience.

## **Orientation Shadow Day**

In an effort to provide an experiential, comprehensive learning experience to HEC/SA student, the Orientation Shadow Day was created by the coordinator of the HEC/SA program and the director of new student programs. West Chester University has a two-part orientation program. Part 1 is a one-day program in June, which hosts approximately 300-350 students and their families each session. Part 2 begins at the end of August, prior to the beginning of the semester. Orientation Shadow Day was held during Part 1.

First and second year graduate students in the HEC/SA program were invited to attend the event. They were instructed to explore the new student program orientation website to understand the messages and information given to new students and families. Students arrived on campus at the beginning of the orientation day. They were provided with their schedule for the day, which incorporated sessions with parents and students together and apart. They received a feedback form to record their observations, suggestions, and "a-ha" moments.

Students observed the check-in process and a welcome overview for new students and families. As undergraduate students were separated into small groups led by orientation leaders, the graduate students stayed behind with the families and listened to information about student development, transition issues, and residence life, housing, and commuter life. The remainder of the morning was dedicated to following the family schedule, which included sessions on financial aid, campus dining, and campus involvement. The graduate students ate their lunch in the same location as the orientation participants. The afternoon was dedicated to following the student schedule, including a new connections event and a resource fair. At the end of the day, the graduate students met for a facilitated discussion and debrief.

## **Results**

There were two significant results from the experience. First, the students were able to provide substantial feedback to the director of new student programs. Their perspective as observers without an agenda was invaluable. Although not the focus of this article, the value of a "mystery shopper" cannot be underestimated. Second, the students reported significant learning and insight about the complexities of the orientation function and program. The facilitated discussion and debrief was essential in answering questions and in helping students understand how the orientation function differs based on the type of institution and population it serves.

Feedback from graduate students included:

....an incoming freshman...is so focused upon the idea of finding their

niche....I think the team at orientation did a great job of challenging and supporting those students.

I gained insight into what information is important for the parents to know and what information the university *feels* [emphasis added] is important for the parents to know.

It was great to...be able to provide feedback and discuss as a group. We were able to observe, apply, and discuss what we are learning in class and from this experience.

I had no idea of the caliber of work and planning that goes into organizing these events. The collaboration with other offices is key...really solidified my desire to possibly pursue a career in this area.

The successful results of the Orientation Shadow Day have led to plans to repeat the program next summer. Also, other shadow experiences, including residence life staff training and student activities late night programs, are being considered.

## Recommendations

Other ways to expose graduate students to the orientation function are to

1. Ensure that new students attend their own orientation, either one created for all graduate students at your institution or one that is designed specifically for your program. They will learn what they need to be successful, and they will be reintroduced to the orientation function.
2. Suggest that students become members of professional organizations such as ACPA, NASPA, and NODA. Recommend involvement and membership in the regional associations. Encourage students to consider preparing and submitting a national or regional conference program proposal.
3. Encourage active applications for NODA internships. If allowed by their graduate program, students may be able to use the internship as field experience credit. Advertise the NODA internship opportunity early in the fall semester, targeting students new to the program.
4. Share and discuss current articles about creative orientation practices, parental and family involvement, and new student transitions. Create conversations in class that reflect on this information.
5. Encourage students to volunteer with the orientation office. There are opportunities to participate in the orientation planning team, selection and training of orientation leaders, logistical assistance on orientation days, creating and analyzing evaluations, planning and implementing welcome week activities and assessment work, including leading focus groups of new students during the academic year.

## Conclusion

Student affairs preparation programs are diverse and time sensitive. Observing the orientation program gives students information and experience they might not

obtain in their graduate program. Orientation provides a comprehensive view that will benefit graduate students, regardless of their functional area of interest and aspiration, as they enter and persist in the field of student affairs.

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