

STUDENT ORIENTATION

A Service Whose Time Has Come

Most colleges and universities are admitting increasing numbers of students through special admissions programs that offset deficiencies in background and preparation. They are also accepting many older, largely part-time learners whose family responsibilities have interrupted or delayed their higher education.

At the same time, Roueche¹ contends that the problem of the remedial student has not been solved in the past two decades. Furthermore, he doubts that colleges can look forward to a future of literate freshmen. College students are enrolling with more academic

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and personal problems than ever before, problems that pose tremendous chal-

lenges for faculty and staff. American high schoolers are leaving school with even poorer academic skills than a decade ago. "Couple this poor academic preparation with the dramatic increase of minorities and foreign-born students," concludes Roueche, "and one gets a picture of the challenge and dilemma ahead."²

The Seminar Approach

Freshman seminar can be a useful intervention model to promote first-year adjustment. It usually integrates two components: (1) providing realistic information about the transition to college and (2) creating a socially supportive environment.

In an attempt to identify and evaluate how a freshman-orientation seminar relates to early adjustment at college, Schwitzer, McGovern, and Robbins³ asked 113 entering freshman volunteers to participate in the freshman seminar course. The students' average age was 18, with 41 percent male and 59 percent female; 14 percent were black, 82 percent were white, and 4 percent represented other races. The mean SAT score was 909.71, and their high school grade-point average ranged from 2.0 to 4.0 (M=2.76).

Using five-point Likert-type scales, the freshmen afterward rated the usefulness and relevance of both the information presented and the classroom discussions at about four, or useful and relevant.⁴ More specifically, students rated as most helpful the practical components of the course: use of the university bulletin and university procedures, exploration of campus resources, and career planning. The part of the course dealing with purposes of an undergraduate education was judged as least helpful.

A comparison between scores on the information-based quiz before and after the seminar revealed significant improvement, with the average number of correct responses increasing from 11.43 at arrival to 25.48 following the course. An increase in self-reported social adjustment was also found: from a mean of 72.12 for the first week of the semes-

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ter to 77.55 following the 10-week intervention. Finally, measures of ultimate outcomes were obtained: The mean fall semester GPA for participants was 2.51 (on a four-point scale), and the mean number of academic credits completed was 12.85. All of the 113 students returned for the second semester.

Three Novel Orientation Programs

Novel freshman-orientation programs at three universities seem to be easing the trauma and stress experienced by high school graduates as they face the dual pressures of adjusting to college-level course work and campus social life.⁵ The programs also appear to have produced two unexpected results: freshman orientation can improve faculty teaching and strengthen the sense of

community on campus.

1. Bard College's Freshman Workshop in Language and Thinking, required of all entering students, is a three-week orientation program that ends just before the start of the fall semester. The workshop does not focus on grammar or syntax, but on the finer elements of sophisticated writing. It was designed to make students aware of the writing process and to prepare them to use the thinking and communication skills required in college. Limited to 12 students per section, the classes focus on invention, reading, and responding to writing. At the end of the workshop, students receive letters assessing the development of their writing and suggesting methods for further improvement. Although most of the workshop instructors teach English-related courses, an increasing number represent disciplines such as math, science, and psychology.

2. At Dartmouth College, the Freshman Trips program features three-day adventures in the New England wilderness. Groups of six to ten students—with one campus volunteer—bicycle, canoe, backpack, or fly-fish on campus-owned property.

"We want to make sure every freshman feels comfortable with their trip," says Student Director Jay Benson.⁶ "Participation is the objective." Their more recent trips have included such academic elements as "Writing in Nature," "Forestry in New Hampshire," and "Manmade Environmental Problems."

3. The University of Puget Sound's week-long, two-part freshman orientation program is appropriately titled "Prelude & Passages." The Prelude segment emphasizes small-group seminars that introduce college-level reading, writing, and thinking skills. The Passages portion, an outdoor adventure camp on Washington's rugged Olympic Peninsula, offers an excellent setting for freshmen to strike up friendships with peers and faculty members.

In the Prelude seminars eight to ten students meet with a faculty member to discuss and analyze creative and expository works from a variety of disciplines. Writing and informal discussions are also important components. Though the work is not scored, other students offer evaluations through written comments and discussion. This environ-

ment also affords freshmen one-on-one contact with professors prior to the beginning of classes. Incoming freshmen come to regard their Prelude instructors as unofficial advisors for the next four years.

“Our surveys show students who participate in Prelude & Passages adjust more quickly to the rigors of college life,” observes David Dodson, dean of students at Puget Sound and founder of Passages.⁷ One 1988 student participant wrote: “The entire orientation program made me feel more comfortable about starting school. I ended up knowing at least one person in all of my classes and I wasn’t scared to go to class since I had an idea of what to expect.”⁸

Three Orientation Texts

Becoming a Master Student: In this text David Ellis⁹ bases his “master student” program on three basic assumptions: (1) There are no secrets. (2) There are no victims. (3) There are no solos. Each assumption carries with it specific implications for freshman-orientation programs:

1. There are no secrets about how to be a successful student. Many under-achievers can benefit from becoming aware of effective strategies, experimenting with them, finding those that work, and turning them into habitual behaviors in their daily routines.

2. Blaming others or circumstances fails to empower students to get what they want. Even blaming themselves will get in the way of success. Taking responsibility opens the door to making choices that allow them to be in control of their lives.

3. Students are social beings, and as such, peer pressure is a major force in their lives. An effective orientation program must provide an opportunity for students to connect with others and to form mutually beneficial relationships. Almost as important, students also need to become aware of the many resources, programs, and people that can promote their success.

Effective Study Skills: James Semones characterizes his orientation program as “Life 101.” In his first chapter he declares: “Success . . . is not a thing, an achievement, a material possession. It represents the process of becoming a better person.”¹⁰ Therefore, educators must not dichotomize students into mu-

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tually exclusive academic and developmental spheres. Life skills are closely associated with study skills; that is, students with lives in good order tend to perform better in school. Conversely, poor academic performance is frequently symptomatic of adjustment problems. Any study approach that fails to address larger life issues is doomed to failure from the start.

Semones presents what he calls “ten of the most fundamental . . . universal principles for living.” They both repeat and extend Ellis’ three:

1. There are no secrets to success.
2. Success is difficult: It requires hard work.
3. Your success is your responsibility.
4. To succeed you must sometimes fail.

5. Some people will try to prevent your success.

6. Ongoing victimization requires your permission and cooperation.

7. Life is not fair.

8. Your success requires positive relationships with others.

9. Success requires the effective use of time.

10. To succeed, you must give more than is merely required.¹¹

Strategies for Success: Other such lists emphasize the social and affective needs of the student—most notably John Gardner’s “twenty-one ways to succeed in college.”¹² Besides the obvious learning-to-study and learning-to-use-the-library cautions, Gardner’s three most prominent “social” admonitions to college freshmen are: (1) Find and get to know one individual on campus who cares about your survival. (2) Make one or two close friends among your peers. (3) Get involved in campus activities. These new approaches indicate that colleges are finally recognizing the whole student.

Retaining Present Students

In addition to orienting new students, colleges also need to explore strategies for keeping the students they already have. Colleges cannot afford to reload from scratch every year. In the exit interview process at the university at

which I am currently employed, we are now involving students who leave the institution in a "may-we-keep-in-touch" dialogue.¹³

1. We provide name-and-address cards for dropouts to request further mailings and contacts from university personnel, e.g., new semester class schedules, announcements of lyceums, and other special events. The response from our dropouts has been very positive. More than 70 percent indicate a desire to return to us, so we are merely taking advantage of their expressed hopes.

2. Because at least 50 percent of those withdrawing from our institution are non-traditional students with spouses and children, we provide them with addresses and contact numbers for common needs such as financial counseling, child-services resources, family counseling centers, et cetera.

3. In order to help students continue their educational goals, we provide information about correspondence and extension courses, as well as mentor and apprenticeship sources.

4. Finally, we are creating a telephone network for follow-up and emotional support to withdrawing students. Interested classmates and faculty will use

this network to keep in touch with dropouts.

Conclusion

College is now even less optional than ever before. New technology, burgeoning information, and micro-chip advances have changed the workplace so drastically that in the near future few people will be able to support themselves and their families without some education beyond high school.

Colleges need to find innovative ways to integrate students into college life, and to help them succeed. Even the best students sometimes need help to survive. Many have not been taught some skills they need to succeed. Too many of the brighter freshmen never had to "waste" much time studying in high school. They do not understand what being a serious college student is all about.

Noted educator George Kuh¹⁴ reminds us that college can be both a fun and a confusing place, especially if students do not know where to get answers to their questions, or even what questions to ask. Regardless of what schools students attend, they will learn much about the institution if they are provided with events and programs that commu-

nicate to them what is required to make the most of their education. When orientation experiences make it clear to students that they are, indeed, full members of the institutional family, they learn, in effect, that they are expected to help the school attain its mission and to participate in running the institution.

Seminars for entering students not only help students to survive, they can help today's colleges and universities to survive as well! ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. John E. Roueche, "Leadership for 2000," Sid Richardson Regents Chair in Community College Leadership at the University of Texas at Austin. Printed in the *Management Report - 1989-1990/1* by the Association of California Community College Administrators.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

3. Alan M. Schwitzer, Thomas V. McGovern, and Steven B. Robbins, "Adjustment Outcomes of a Freshman Seminar: A Utilization-Focused Approach," *Journal of College Student Development* 32:6 (November 1991), pp. 484-489.

4. Students' response to seminars on the use of the university bulletin and university procedures produced a mean score of 3.9, with a standard deviation of 1.1, while response to exploration of campus resources and career planning seminars had a mean of 4.0. The course dealing with the purposes of an undergraduate education received a mean score of 3.2.

Comparison of scores on the information-based quiz before and after the seminar produced a $p < .1$.

5. Barry Bauka and Philip Phibbs, "Novel Orientation Programs Introduce Students to Campus Community," *Educational Record* 70:3/4 (Summer/Fall 1989), pp. 41, 42.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

9. David B. Ellis, *Becoming a Master Student* (Rapid City, South Dakota: College Survival, Inc., 1991).

10. James K. Semones, *Effective Study Skills: A Step-by-Step System for Achieving Student Success* (Fort Worth, Texas: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1991), p. 4.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-18.

12. John N. Gardner and A. Jerome Jewler, *Your College Experience: Strategies for Success* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1992), pp. 6-9.

13. Gerald Colvin, Cathy Long, and Alice Stephens, "Healing Through the Exit Interview: An Attempt to Describe and Assist the Withdrawing Student" (October 9, 1992). Paper presented at the meeting of the Southeastern Conference of Counseling Center Personnel, Hot Springs, Arkansas.

14. George D. Kuh, "The Role of Admissions and Orientation in Creating Appropriate Expectations for College Life," *College & University* 66:2 (Winter 1991), pp. 75-82.