

New student orientation programs promoting diversity

Carl H. Boeing

Michael T. Miller

Dr. Boeing is an Instructor of History at Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Dr. Miller is an Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

New student orientation programs are designed to ease the transition of new students into their collegiate environments. As diverse enrollments have increased throughout higher education, new student orientation programs have been identified as a key tool for establishing levels of expectation and performance, including the promotion of diversity issues. The current national study of orientation directors explored how these student orientation programs can best facilitate promoting diversity. Findings revealed a host of strategies, particularly noting methods that integrate rather than isolate diversity issues as well as using institutional leaders to stress the importance of tolerance and diversity.

Introduction

Higher education institutions have assumed some responsibility for assuring a level of social justice. It can take the form of an equality of access and affordability, but is also manifest in breaking down stereotypes and bias, by allowing for the teaching, tolerance, and advocacy of diversity of thinking, ethnicity, and cultures. Often, the task has become reduced to general terms about teaching students to live a civic life in a democratic society. In more practical terms, the responsibility for social justice means that colleges and universities have a responsibility to teach diversity.

Diversity as a conceptual problem is handled in numerous ways by different institutions. Some build multiculturalism into the curriculum, some offer specific programs on multi-ethnicity, and other institutions rely on high minority student enrollments to present themselves in a meaningful way in courses and student life.

Community colleges have advocated for diversity through a number of programs, outreach efforts, and curricular additions. Although these colleges enroll the majority of minority students in American higher education, they are often the venue where students with the least exposure to diversity come together (Williams, 2004). Although many urban campuses are truly melting pots of multi-ethnicity, others are highly segregated along racial lines.

The first opportunity community colleges have to begin breaking down what racism may exist and to develop an appreciation for diverse cultures comes when students first arrive on campus. The first few weeks can establish not only a level of trust, acceptance, and appreciation for diversity, but also have the potential to establish the future success of students in the classroom and at the campus (Cook, Cully, & Huftalin, 2003). The purpose for conducting the current study was to identify positive steps that community colleges can use in their new student orientation (NSO) programs to foster more positive feelings among students toward diversity.

Related literature

New student orientation

Over 70% of all undergraduate students participate in some form of new student orientation or first-year seminar (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993). Although there is limited

research on community college orientation programs, they have been reported to exist in some format in the majority of community colleges (Stephenson, 1997). Such programs ease the transition of new students into the college environment (Brown, 1997) and, perhaps more importantly, are seen as the institution's tool for conveying institutional expectations and messages (Twale & Schaller, 2003). Specifically, the programs can enhance new student self-esteem, which is in turn a significant positive predictor of personal, social, and academic achievement (Hickman, Bartholomae, & McKenry, 2000). Additionally, new student programs provide opportunities for involvement that can aid in retention and provide a tool to build social support networks that can help students cope in college (Gardner, 2001).

As Hu, Shouping, and Kuh (2003a; 2003b) noted, racial identity is often a factor for new students, and college administrators must find ways to help students learn to appreciate racial and cultural diversity. Transitional programs, such as first-year seminars and orientation programming, have been identified as effective tools to help students accept individual differences of one another.

New student orientation is different in several important ways for community colleges when compared to four-year universities. First, community colleges are less likely to have residential campuses and the resulting sense of

social community where students can conveniently and frequently gather. Second, many four-year colleges provide a wide array of co- and extra-curricular offerings that allow for greater social support development among students. And third, many community colleges have smaller class sizes, offer more courses in the evening and early morning, and focus on job training and occupational education, both areas with very specific outcomes that might rely less on social integration. Consequently, community colleges must emphasize opportunities that bring an entire class or campus community together, such as first year student orientation (Stephenson, 1997).

Green (1996) notes that community college new student orientation is difficult for a variety of reasons, and a typical response is the inclusion of a new student seminar rather than an orientation program. These seminars, often called "101" classes, include a curriculum similar to other first-year student seminars and include information on using the library, navigating campus life, and study and life skills. Stephenson (1997) similarly notes that new student orientation in community colleges is substantially different in terms of its structure, often consisting of no more than an hour or afternoon session with new students. The power to influence the future success of students, however, is still significant.

Community college students

Community college students have historically been under-represented groups of individuals who require some accommodation as they begin higher education. The type of accommodation can vary dramatically from requiring a low-cost alternative to four-year institutions and course scheduling that more readily permits full-time employment, to students who require remedial coursework or specific job training (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). Enrollment growth in community colleges has surpassed 10 million students, nearly equaling the number of undergraduate students enrolled in four-year institutions. Community colleges, however, enroll more students of color (57% of all minority students) than four-year colleges and universities and enroll a disproportionate number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These colleges also enroll nearly twice the number of Hispanic students in public higher education than do four-year institutions (Weidlein, 2004).

However, the composition of the contemporary community college student body has begun to shift, as evidenced by the increasing number of traditional-aged students enrolling (Evelyn, 2005). Wolgemuth, Kees, and Safarik (2003) further note that community colleges are enrolling more women, and the intention of these women is polarized between two objectives. The first group is women of traditional age who intend to pursue a

four-year degree. They enroll with intent to transfer, and are attempting to work through general education requirements and introductory coursework at a lower cost. The second group of women is more closely aligned with the historical description of community college students; they lack sufficient academic skills for enrollment in other institutions, they have family and work obligations that require their attention, and they often lack the self-confidence to be successful in the classroom. The result is that community colleges find themselves serving very different and divided populations of students.

Additional factors facing community college leaders are the unique characteristics of the millennial generation of college students. They are more frequently the product of single-child households with dual-career parents. They have been more frequently involved in organized activities both in and out of school, and a growing number have participated in professional counseling (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Zis, 2002). As a group they have experienced a more structured upbringing with greater access and opportunity to participate in organized community activities. Their level of expectations has many community college administrators re-thinking the types of services and activities available on their campuses (Pope & Miller, 2003).

The literature supports the concept that community college students are indeed different today

than they were even 20 years ago. Consequently, programming to more directly meet their needs and expectations is appropriate. New student orientation programs are one such powerful tool that can help students develop cognitively, academically, and socially. As such, updated new student orientation programs seem a logical focus for promoting diversity and greater cross-cultural understanding.

Research methods

The Delphi survey technique, an exploratory research tool, was selected for a descriptive study designed to initiate a larger conversation by orientation professionals and community college leaders. The technique has a number of advantages that make it appropriate for exploring how NSO programs can promote inclusiveness. First, the Delphi survey technique allows for consensus to develop among geographically separated experts (Sackman, 1975; Weaver, 1971). For the current study, 15 professionally active community college NSO directors who are members of the National Orientation Director Association were identified and solicited for participation in the study. The researchers used a replacement technique until 15 professionals were identified and committed to completing a three-round modified Delphi process. The study makes the assumption that by their practice and professional involvement, those selected for the sample have some level of expertise regarding the structure and usefulness of new

student orientation programs in community colleges.

Second, the Delphi process allows for individual reflection and eliminates peer pressure to conform (Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1974), a characteristic of great importance considering the sensitive nature of diversity and inclusion. And third, the Delphi procedure allows for the creation of consensus among the respondents (Miles, 1997), practicing community college NSO directors, which can lead to possible recommendations for community college NSO programs.

Data was collected throughout the 2003-2004 academic year using traditional mail service. Although electronic versions of surveys are reliable, traditional mail service provided a stronger assurance of anonymity. All 15 NSO directors completed all three rounds of the modified Delphi survey. The initial stem for respondents (Round 1) was, "Based on your professional experiences, how can community college new student orientation programs promote diversity?" Each participant was asked to identify up to five methods or strategies. In Round 1, the 15 participants identified 53 (an average of 3.53 per participant) possible methods for promoting diversity in new student orientation programs, but after checking for duplication, a total of 30 remained in the second and third rounds of the survey (averaging 2.0 per participant).

Findings

In Round 1, respondents rated 12 items with a mean score of 3.9 or higher on the 5-point Likert-type scale. These 12 strategies, shown in Table 1, had an overall mean rating of 4.15 during Round 2. With 14 rating changes by respondents (0.93 rating changes per respondent) and six mean score changes for individual items, the overall mean rating was also 4.15 in Round 3.

Respondents agreed most strongly with two strategies for promoting diversity through orientation: *to show how more money (salary) follows behaviors that promote diversity* (mean 4.6) and *to show the positive economics of a successfully inclusive environment* (mean 4.6). Respondents also had a high level of agreement with the strategy of *not just talking about diversity but showing that it is important* (mean 4.3), along with *spending time on expected student behaviors* (mean 4.2), and *incorporating diversity into examples* (mean 4.2). Strategies with the least agreement in the upper tier of effective strategies include *showing diverse populations getting along as friends* (mean 3.9) and *using pictures in materials that show diversity* (mean 3.8).

Strategies that had a lower level of agreement by orientation directors as being possibly effective for promoting diversity through orientation include 18 possible strategies shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Effective strategies for promoting diversity through orientation

Strategy	Round 2 Mean	Round 3 Mean	SD (Rd 3)	Range
Show more money follows behaviors that promote diversity	4.6	4.6	.762	4
Show the positive economics of a successfully inclusive environment	4.7	4.6	.840	4
Don't talk about diversity, just show it is important	4.3	4.3	.699	4
Incorporate diversity into examples	4.3	4.2	.966	4
Spend time on expected student behaviors	4.1	4.2	.835	4
Have diverse orientation team leaders	4.0	4.1	.840	4
Have minority keynote speakers	3.9	4.1	.762	4
Have community representatives discuss inclusion in the workplace	4.1	4.1	.846	4
Talk about diversity gone bad and how to prevent it	4.0	4.0	.777	4
Get people of color involved	4.0	4.0	.781	4
Show diverse people getting along as friends	3.9	3.9	.983	5
Use pictures that show diversity in college material	4.0	3.8	1.00	4

These strategies range in their final mean ratings from 3.7 to 3.1. Round 2 ratings show an overall mean of 3.51. In Round 3, 29 individual rating changes result in six mean score changes and an overall mean rating of 3.49. Orientation directors identified six possible strategies in the second tier that would be the most effective, including *having a diversity center on campus*, *holding diversity workshops*, *talking about the real world (during orientation) where everybody has to get along*, *using a skit to bring people together*, *having sessions for parents in other languages*, and *including literature in different languages*, all of which had mean ratings of 3.7. Two of the 18 strategies had low levels of agreement, both with a 3.1 mean rating: *providing tours of diverse environments* and *providing international food*.

Table 2. Other possible strategies for promoting diversity through orientation

Strategy	Round 2 Mean	Round 3 Mean	SD (Rd 3)	Range
Have a diversity center on campus	3.7	3.7	.789	4
Hold diversity workshops	3.7	3.7	.833	4
Include literature in different languages	3.7	3.7	.848	4
Talk about the real world where everybody has to get along	3.7	3.7	.887	4
Use a skit to bring up the subject of diversity	3.7	3.7	.791	4
Have sessions for parents in another language	3.7	3.7	.654	4
Include world events	3.5	3.6	.800	4
Have people from other countries as greeters	3.6	3.6	.946	5
Use a panel of diverse students in "Get to Know Us"	3.6	3.5	.799	5
Give stars/stickers for those who pledge to be inclusive	3.5	3.5	.701	4
Social activities that bring people together	3.6	3.5	1.10	5
Include reading materials in packets	3.4	3.4	.868	4
Include diversity links on website	3.5	3.4	.933	4
Include self-paced diversity workshops online	3.4	3.4	1.06	5
Have the president speak about the importance of diversity	3.4	3.4	1.01	5
Include multicultural tracks in orientation	3.3	3.2	1.04	4
Have international food	3.2	3.1	1.21	5
Provide tours of diverse environments	3.1	3.1	1.14	5

Discussion

The most important finding of the research is that those who work in new student orientation programs in community colleges see ways that they can promote more inclusive, diverse environments. For this project alone, they collectively came up with 53 strategies. If community college leaders, especially deans and vice presidents of student services, value diversity and creating inclusive environments, they will find ways to establish levels of expected behavior and acceptance.

The majority of participating orientation leaders agree that the methods for effectively promoting diversity are to show the occupational relevance of inclusiveness and the fiscal benefit of working and adapting in diverse environments. Such thinking suggests that community colleges focus accordingly with students in occupational training and make clear that a central reason for student enrollment is to learn the skills necessary for employment. The mindset of community college orientation coordinators views the institution's role as being one of traditional job training and career preparation experience.

Findings also suggest that institutions need to present models of appropriate behavior to new students, in essence reinforcing Mulendore's (1992) and Twale's (1989) arguments that new student orientation programs are an appropriate mechanism for communicating in-

stitutional expectations of students. So although modeling behavior may be appropriate, respondents also clearly indicate that talking about the importance of diversity can be a negative, almost counterproductive, strategy. Essentially, respondents report that in building diverse environments, acceptance and welcoming should be modeled and illustrated, but should not be labeled "diversity training" or "diversity appreciation."

Diversity and inclusiveness take many forms, and respondents agree that strategies for promoting inclusiveness should not be overly simplistic. For example, institutions should look beyond the stereotypes affiliated with international food and touring diverse environments and being blatant in their discussions of diversity. A more sophisticated approach to promoting diversity is recommended in which community college students are respected for their level of maturity and understanding of the world around them.

As the ratings reveal, orientation professionals suggest that institutions need to make an effort to address diversity. The high levels of agreement on several items emphasize that these efforts should address the need and importance of diversity early in new college students' careers. Orientation programs are the first formalized exposure to the college, and even if the programs are only a half-day in length, they have a responsibility to illustrate expected student behaviors. Inclusiveness should be a

holistic part of the college experience, should include more than just racial differentiations, and should begin early in the student's time on campus.

Further research could include differentiations between diverse cultures and could take into account types of orientation programs. The strategies identified here are a meaningful first step in helping community colleges come to grips with how to respond to the increasingly diverse communities they are welcoming to their campuses.

References

- Barefoot, B. O., & Gardner, J. N. (1993). The freshmen orientation seminar: Extending the benefits of traditional orientation. In M. L. Upcraft, R. H. Mullendore, B. O. Barefoot, & D. S. Fidler (Eds.), *Designing Successful Transitions: A Guide for Orienting Students to College* (pp. 141-154). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience.
- Brown, D. A. (1997). Assessment of anticipated and actual college adjustment in freshmen-oriented students. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 58 (1-A). (UMI No. 95013-111).
- Cohen, A., & Brawer, F. (1996). *The American Community College (3rd ed.)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cook, L., Cully, B. R., & Huftalin, D. (2003). The connecting point: Orientation at community colleges. In J. A. Ward-Roof and C. Hatch (Eds.), *Designing Successful Transitions: A Guide for Orienting Students to College (2nd ed.)*, (pp. 125-135). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Evelyn, J. (2005). Enrollment of students under 22 is rising at community colleges, study finds. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, LI(27), A39.
- Gardner, J. N. (2001). Focusing on the first-year student. (EDRS Document Reproduction Service No. ED 458 865).
- Green, J. T. (1996). Effectiveness of Floyd College Studies 101 on subsequent student success. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.
- Hickman, G. P., Bartholomae, S., & McKenry, P. C. (2000). Influence of parenting style on the adjustment and academic achievement of traditional college freshman. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41, 41-54.
- Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials rising: The next generation*. NY: Vintage.
- Hu, A., Shouping, D., & Kuh, G. D. (2003a). Diversity experience and college student learning and personal development. *Journal of College Student Development*, 44, 320-334.

-
- Hu, A., Shouping, D., & Kuh, G. D. (2003b). Maximizing what students get out of college: Testing a learning productivity model. *Journal of College Student Development, 44*, 185-203.
- Miles, J. (1997). Student leader perceptions of increasing participation in self-governance. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.
- Mullendore, R. H. (1992). Student based programming in orientation. In D. P. Nadler (Ed.), *Orientation Directors Manual* (pp. 43-52). Statesboro, GA: National Orientation Directors Association.
- Pope, M. L., & Miller, M. T. (2003). The millennium community college student: Who are they and how to serve them. Paper presented at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Annual Conference, St. Louis, MO.
- Sackman, H. (1975). *Delphi critique*. Lexington, MA: DC Health.
- Stephenson, G. D. (1997). The impact of a student success course on academic achievement and persistence. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.
- Twale, D. J. (1989). Social and academic development in freshman orientation: A time frame. *NASPA Journal, 27*, 160-167.
- Twale, D. J., & Schaller, M. A. (2003). Mandatory computer purchases and student preparedness: Implications for new student orientation. *Journal of College Orientation and Transition, 10*(2), 60-69.
- Van de Ven, A. H., & Delbecq, A. L. (1974). The effectiveness of nominal, Delphi, and interacting group decision making processes. *Academy of Management Journal, 17*(4), 605-621.
- Weaver, W. T. (1971). The Delphi forecasting method. *Phi Delta Kappan, 52*(5), 267-272.
- Weidlein, E. R. (Ed.). (2004). *Chronicle of higher education almanac issue, 2004-2005*. Washington: Chronicle of Higher Education.
- Williams, R. A. (2004). Community colleges provide access and excellence. *Community College Times, 16*(4), 6.
- Wolgemuth, J. R., Kees, N. L., & Safarik, L. (2003). A critique of research on women published in the Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 1990-2000. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 27*, 757-767.
- Zis, S. (2002). Changing student characteristics: Implications for new student orientation. *Journal of College Orientation and Transition, 10*(1), 64-68.

Copyright of *The Community College Enterprise* is the property of Schoolcraft College, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted on a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.