

Fall Orientation Model for Transfer Students: A Look at

Cornell University New Student Programs

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Abstract

After looking at different models of orientation in upstate New York, Cornell University emerged as having one of the top transfer specific orientation programs. Their fall orientation model is inclusive of all transfer and visiting students and allows them to transition smoothly into life at Cornell. Furthermore, Orientation Leaders provide a foundation of knowledge for new students but allow them to find their own path through self-directed active learning and empowerment to take ownership of their experience. This paper will discuss the main aspects of why Cornell's transfer orientation program is considered best practice.

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Cornell University is unique in many ways: it is both a land grant institution and a private institution, it is a part of the Ivy League, it encompasses a huge geographic region, and it is located in a small city in upstate New York. Consequently, many of the common orientation program models found at other universities are not suited for Cornell and must be adapted.

Cornell attracts many transfer, nontraditional, and international students due to the academic rigor it offers. These student populations have very different needs from traditional first-year first-time incoming students. Duggan and Pickering (2007) found that many academic barriers exist for transfer students such as credit articulation, proper advising, and integration with current students. Similarly, Lipka (2008) and Tobolowsky (2012) found that transfer students become disengaged from institutional neglect, but with the proper support and attention, transfer students can succeed both academically and socially (Manning, 2010). In a recent study and report by Cornell University, the institution specifically assessed the campus climate of their transfer population, focusing on needs during orientation and the first year experience (Brown and Hubbell, 2013). Furthermore, in a senior thesis on transforming the transfer experience, Iyer (2012) discovered similar needs and gaps within the realm of orientation.

Using data nationwide and data collected in house, New Student Programs at Cornell has implemented a specific orientation for transfer and nontraditional students with over 30 programs and events. This program aims at meeting the unique needs of transfer students while still providing support through the transition. Although not

specifically stated, an adapted version of Schlossberg's (1981) framework for transition grounds many of the events during orientation week (as cited in Evans et al. 2010). Furthermore, many best practices are used (connection to the mission, setting high expectations, developing ethical values, creating an inclusive community, forging partnerships, and utilizing assessment) to create a holistic model.

Orientation Structure

Fall orientation sets its foundation through student leaders. The entire orientation week is planned by a steering committee of fifteen students and they work directly with 50 orientation supervisors. The supervisors train and support the 400 orientation leaders, who are the front line of orientation. Within the program, there are two steering committee students, four orientation supervisors, and 40 orientation leaders dedicated to transfer orientation. All of these leaders were transfer students themselves.

Starting on move-in day, orientation week has over 200 events for new students with 30 specifically for transfer students. New Student Programs, the individual colleges at Cornell, and other campus partners work together to put on events and programs. Orientation leaders meet with their student group but are not required to take their students to individual events. The students are expected to attend the events and programs that spark their interest. New Student Programs requires students to attend certain programs pertaining to sexual assault, academic integrity, and other presentations about resources on campus. Events fall into different categories of the stages of transition (Schlossberg, 1981), starting with lower risk events such as meet and greets and progressing to more engaging events towards the end of the week after students have

established a foundation. The orientation concludes on the night before classes begin; however New Student Programs continues to program through the following week.

Connection to Mission

Cornell's mission derives from Ezra Cornell's, the founder, famous statement; "I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study." Through their mission, Cornell is committed to fostering integrity, initiative, civic engagement, and responsible stewardship. Orientation is the first place where the institution can connect the mission to every aspect of the student experience throughout college. Reisser and Roper (1999) assert that all functional areas of an institution should use their resources to achieve the mission and goals of that institution.

Through many of the required programming for new students, the Cornell mission and values are communicated thoroughly. A program called Cornell Essentials discusses the new responsibilities that Cornell students now have as a part of the Cornell community, including academic integrity, living as a part of the Ithaca community and alcohol responsibility. Another program Speak About It focuses on a consent positive community and how to lower the risks of sexual assault. Finally, a program Tapestry introduces students to the diverse community at Cornell. All of these programs are tracked with ID scanners and are required in order to graduate.

Setting the Bar High

Students at Cornell University are very self-directed and independent within their own education. According to Kuh (1999), setting the bar high for students and pushing them to meet your expectations will actually drive those students to exceed expectations. The expectation of self-direction is set before the first semester starts. During orientation,

students are responsible for identifying their interests and picking which events they want to attend. Even though the students are assigned an Orientation Leader, they are primarily there to provide resources and information about Cornell and the Ithaca community.

Leaders talk about the events offered through orientation, but are not responsible to take students to them.

The same is expected for transfer students and can actually help minimize transfer shock – the dip in grade point average the semester after transfer (Duggan & Pickering, 2007; Manning, 2010). Transfer leaders, who were all previous transfer students, are trained to uphold these expectations by facilitating difficult conversations with their group about independently pursuing their interests at Cornell. This conversation helps students start to think about self-directed learning and encourages them to take ownership of their orientation experience.

Creating an Inclusive Community

In preparation for new student's arrival, the staff in New Student Programs at Cornell holds diversity and inclusion sessions with Orientation Leaders. One of the activities pushes the leaders to reflect on their own identities and how their identities affect the Cornell community. Posters were placed around the room with the seven major identity categories on them: race/ethnicity, ability, gender, age, sexual orientation, spirituality, and socioeconomic status (SES). Facilitators asked students to move to the poster that resonated the most with them after reading a statement. The statements consisted of "I think about this identity everyday" and "I get the most privilege from this identity."

The second activity enabled student leaders to reflect on personal biases and stereotypes that they carry with them. Five situational profiles were placed on posters around the room. Participants were asked to move to the situation that would be easiest and most difficult to switch with. From both activities, dialogues started about intersecting identities, stereotypes, and the Cornell community of inclusion. In line with Brazzell & Reisser (1999), creating inclusive communities starts with the faculty and staff engaging student leaders in intercultural dialogs.

The incoming transfer population at Cornell University is less diverse overall than the incoming first-year class. This issue should be of concern to the admissions department at Cornell; however, there could be a deeper issue in the transfer function (Mayhew, Stipeck, & Dorow, 2011) of the community college system in New York. The main responsibility of orientation for students of underrepresented minorities in the transfer population is to connect them to communities of support (Brazzell & Reisser, 1999). A new program this year during orientation was the Transfer Students of Color Brunch. Staff members from different offices focused on diversity initiatives were invited to connect with new transfers. This event was highly successful due to the buy in from the staff and the intimate yet casual setting of a brunch. Although strides are being made to support underrepresented students, orientation needs to develop more programs aimed at different populations (first generation, students of color, nontraditional students, gap year students).

Forging Educational Partnerships

In order to host over 200 events during orientation week as well as many college specific events, New Student Programs must cultivate strong partnerships with other

departments on campus. The office itself contains one full time staff member, two summer interns, and a student staff of 15. Even though this staff hosts around 40 of the events independently from other offices, they need to rely on other folks around campus (facilities, health and safety, catering) to successfully execute an event.

Schroeder (1999) discusses the necessity of strong partnerships but also discusses the many challenges when working across campus. The director of New Student Programs has worked for many years to form partnerships that quell any concerns such as “We’ve never done it that way.” She was able to see past the boundaries of her own division and role and connect orientation to the greater mission of Cornell. Her willingness to leave her own comfort zone, utilization of diverse physical spaces, and creating cross-functional teams emulates Schroeder’s (1999) points on interdepartmental relationships.

Active Learning

Similarly to the section discussing about setting the bar high, one of Cornell’s core goals and expectations is to promote active learning among its’ students. Although it does set very high expectations for self-directed learning, Cornell provides orientation leaders, staff, and faculty support to meet the students where they are at. By doing this, Cornell is able to individually help each student cross the bridge to independent, life-long learning. The bridge metaphor, created and discussed by Baxter Magolda (1999), helps higher education professionals discern their role when working with students in an active learning environment.

Orientation leaders are also pushed to develop active learning skills. Specifically, professional staff in orientation takes a very hands-off approach after orientation leader

training and expect leaders to create a positive group dynamic, set group expectations, and run their own meetings. Although this method might not be the most efficient and prone to errors, this is an important experience for the student leaders and very valuable for their development (Baxter Magolda, 1999).

Ethics and Values

Orientation is a great way to introduce the ethics and values that the institution wants all students to adhere to in the learning community. Dalton (1999) asserts that character development is a major factor in the holistic development of student affairs work. One area was addressed in depth for the first time ever at Cornell orientation: academic honesty. With ever evolving technology, cheating in higher education has grown, whether intentional or unintentional (Dalton, 1999). File sharing, text messaging, and other innovative forms of technology have blurred the lines of academic integrity and cheating. In Cornell's new program "Cheating," students, faculty, and staff discuss academic integrity, expectations, and ways to avoid intentional and unintentional cheating. Although assessment and evaluation of the program still needs to be analyzed, this new best practice has set a foundation for academic character development at Cornell.

Orientation leaders also are challenged to formulate their own ethical values. During the orientation week, many current students move back to Ithaca in preparation for the upcoming year. Some of these students choose to throw parties and invite student leaders to attend. As a part of orientation, we ask all of our leaders to stay dry from drugs and alcohol throughout orientation week and if they are caught, they will be dismissed

from the program. A student leader code of conduct is crucial to the success of Cornell's orientation program and ensures that all leaders represent Cornell positively.

Assessment and Evaluation

New Student Programs at Cornell has implemented a rigorous assessment of orientation leader training and orientation week. Pascarella and Whitt (1999) note the usefulness of assessment and evaluation of student affairs work in order to prove fulfillment of learning objectives at the same time as keeping relevance. Although many student affairs professionals choose not to assess their work, Cornell encourages a culture of assessment. For orientation training, a pre-evaluation was given to all of the orientation leaders with question clusters for each of the training learning outcomes. After the training, a post-evaluation is given with the same cluster categories. From there, the professional staff can make a comparative analysis and evaluate each training objective individually and use the information to inform the next training session.

The orientation week evaluation is larger in size and importance to the university. There are many stakeholders and partners across campus that contribute to this survey (Schroeder, 1999). One of the strongest partnerships in the assessment effort is with institutional research. The assessment professionals take time out of their schedule to review and brainstorm how to make the assessment stronger. With their feedback, New Student Programs is able to put out a strong survey that will measure their learning outcomes as well as evaluate their events and programs. Moreover, they are able to use this data to recognize gaps in their programming and directly work to close those gaps in upcoming years (Pascarella and Whitt, 1999).

Recommendations

Cornell has a developed and adapted an extensive and effective orientation for transfer students. With any program, there is always room for improvement. First, the transfer population overall is less diverse than the incoming first-year first-time new students (Brown and Hubbell, 2013). The entire institution and the 2-year institution partners need to be more intentional with the transfer population to serve more diverse students. Consequently with a more diverse incoming transfer class, New Student Programs will need to create more programs to support these students (Mayhew, 2011). As a professional in the office this year, I took steps toward this goal by creating the Transfer Students of Color Brunch to connect students to communities of support at Cornell.

The second recommendation would be to include more current upperclassmen in transfer events later in the orientation week. One reoccurring theme in the literature and transfer climate reports was transfer students feel comfortable with creating community among transfer students but have more difficulty meeting current students in their class (Brown and Hubbell, 2013). This may be exceptionally hard for students within colleges with a small number of transfer students. New Student Programs should invite all current upperclassmen to transfer events on the last two days of orientation, particularly the late night events.

The final recommendation is to provide additional and intentional support to transfer coming from 2-year institutions. This is quite a unique challenge since there needs to be a balance between supporting this population while not singling these

students out. New Student Programs may want to look into first generation student programs and adapting them to the transfer population.

Conclusion

Transfer orientation programs rarely differ in any meaningful way from first-year programming. The other schools I visited throughout the summer either included transfer students in the first-year orientation or a bare-bones version solely focused on academic support. Although academic support is crucial to transfer success, a more holistic approach is needed for transfer students to persist through graduation. Cornell University intentionally programs in a holistic view for their incoming and visiting students. Even though there are improvements to be made to the orientation program, Cornell has journeyed through uncharted territory to support the transfer population.

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