

Rethinking New Student Orientation

[Matthew R. Shupp](#)

RETURN

edited 4/13/14

Orientation can be the defining moment in the transition to college for the student

- a time in which basic habits are formed that influence students academic success and personal growth –
- and marks the beginning of a new educational experience.
- Mullendore and Banahan, 2005.

NEED FOR THE PROGRAM

According to the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (2005), 65.2% of all schools surveyed indicate they offer extended and on-going orientation programs. Of these programs, nearly 80% offer academic seminars on various topics. In response to a survey distributed in 2003, students identified the development of academic skill as one of the most important skills acquired from these comprehensive programs. But what is orientation, and why is it important? Mullendore and Banahan (2005) sum up orientation as the need for students to know academic requirements, course offerings, registration procedures [and] to assist students in their adjustment to and involvement with the college (p. 393).

OVERVIEW

Research has indicated that First-Year Experience Programs are relevant and necessary for students retention in higher education (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). New Student Orientation Programs are critical to this experience. The programs make a substantial impact on welcoming and connecting students as they transition to a college or university. More importantly, these orientations introduce students to the individuals and resources they will need when they are in personal or academic jeopardy – resources that many students overlook or forget are available to assist with their success in college. Ultimately, orientation programs are the bridge, the linchpin, between the last stages of recruitment and the first stages of retention.

At University X, there are many events we could call orientation. These take place at various times, vary in breadth and depth, and cover a variety of topics. These include, but are not limited to, the large one-day events, one-day curriculum meetings, on-going curriculum meetings, registration events, and Freshman Orientation Seminar classes.

With the exception of registering for classes, all of these events suggest that the students participation is optional. Given the demographics of our student body – students of color, single parents, and older adults – they often juggle conflicting priorities that require them to choose one event over another. Should our students take care of a family obligation or attend an orientation event? Should he or she be present at a full-time job or miss a day of work to attend an advisor meeting? Conflict is inevitable, and sacrifices often need to be made.

But why must this be? I believe that it is important to reach out to our students, rather than having the students always reach out to us. In other words, we, as an institution, need to be intentional in evaluating whether or not our current orientation model is meeting the needs of our student population. Our goal is to assist students at University X to succeed. Can we be doing things differently? And if so, what might those things be?

University X is an urban community college located in one of the largest cities in the country. Servicing more than 40,000 a year, part of its mission is to give open access to the community members of which it serves. As part of University X's Strategic Plan (2004-2009), the College will strengthen its ability to identify and set priorities for an effective response to the changing educational needs of its communities (p. 41). The need for this objective in the strategic plan has been illustrated through dramatic changes in the student body from semester to semester. Many do not realize that, for the past several years, the College has seen an increase in student enrollment and attendance at New Student Orientation programs, yet has witnessed a lack of retention of students, primarily African American men, over a full academic year (September – May).

University X students are often first generation college students whose experience in maneuvering the college bureaucracy is limited. Knowledge and understanding of key processes such as financial aid and registration is narrow. With busy work schedules and family commitments, time is of the essence. In a world of fast-food drive-thru windows and limited attention spans, students expect that when they stop on to the college campus, they will be able to instantly apply and receive their financial aid money, register for classes, and pick up a student ID – all on the same day without any problems.

However, the faculty, staff, and administration attempt to cram the above-mentioned topics, along with several other lectures on curriculum prerequisites, understanding college culture, and the need to meet with your advisor, into a one-day, non-mandatory event. Obviously, there appears to be a disconnect between what students feel is most important to accomplish (their needs) and what the College (staff, administration, faculty) feels is most important to accomplish (what we think they need to learn).

How do we teach students the survival skills they need while meeting their needs? One way to accomplish this may be a little at a time. We need to find multiple ways of orienting students beyond just offering a one-day event each Fall and Spring semester. As Mullendore and Banahan (2005) stated, [Orientation] is not accomplished in a one or two day orientation event, but it can and should be done through a comprehensive, multi-faceted orientation process beginning at the time of admission and continuing throughout the entire first year (p. 391).

Given that the large one-day orientation is optional, *if* and when a student attends this event, the challenge is trying to squeeze in all the pertinent information into about three hours – the amount of time it seems students are willing to give an orientation program. By noon, students are no longer interested and begin to leave the orientation event. Unfortunately, this means that most students do not stay for important curriculum meetings or campus tours.

To accomplish orientation goals and to have a positive impact on retention, it is imperative that orientation be considered a comprehensive process rather than a single event (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). So how do we reach our students on an on-going basis? One key is to look at what we know students want and build the College's orientation information around this.

PROPOSED ENHANCEMENTS TO REGISTRATION

Students primary goal when they come to campus for the first time is to register for classes. What students perceive is reality for them; and their perception of the registration process is one of long lines, a lack of

customer service, and overall disorganization. Therefore, I am proposing that several pieces of orientation be included during the on-campus registration periods. Once our students are already on campus taking care of one of their needs, it is prudent to include the following during this time:

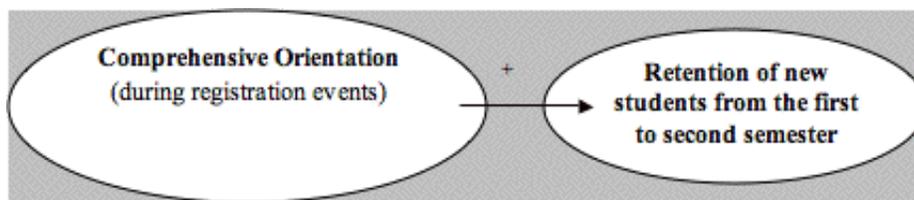
1. A brief overview of succeeding at University X;
2. The ability to have their picture I.D. taken;
3. The ability to apply for or settle their financial aid;
4. The ability to log onto and register for an email account;
5. The ability to receive a campus tour;

This model follows Mullendores and Banahans (2005) concept of orientation that includes pre-enrollment assessment, academic advising, class registration, and college navigation.

CAUSAL (LOOP) DIAGRAM

Causal (Loop) Diagrams (CLD) are visual models that speculate about the relationship between a cause and the effect it may have on a particular outcome. The cause / effect relationship can either have positive or inverse relationships. In the example given below, I am proposing that rethinking orientation to include a more comprehensive approach will have a positive effect on the retention of new students from the first to second semester. In other words, as we increase the breadth and depth of the orientation program, the amount of students retained will also increase.

Figure 1



STAFFING RESOURCES REQUIRED FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Naturally, a comprehensive orientation program requires staffing appropriate to the size and mission of the institution (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). Therefore, support from the following offices will ensure success of this comprehensive orientation effort:

Counseling Center – to assist with curriculum advising

Educational Support Services – to assist with academic support

Information Technology – to provide computer support and email information

Registration – to perform the act of registering our new students

Admissions – to welcome new students and provide a brief orientation overview

Student Affairs – to provide the nuts and bolts of the orientation process

COSTS

The start up cost of implementation of the comprehensive program would be minimal. Staff members employed at the College will provide virtually all orientation material. However, additional staff and faculty time to complete the orientation programs throughout the year would need to be considered and may cause some complication. University X is a unionized work environment, so job descriptions and overtime will need to be taken into consideration when asking individuals to partake in on-going orientation events during the registration of new students.

BENEFITS

Success stories of comprehensive orientation programs are numerous. Including first day / first week experiences and Freshman Orientation Seminars into this program is essential in creating a seamless educational experience for students. In the past, given the large number of students served on registration days, the waiting time to meet with an advisor and register for classes has been a long one. While it is not possible to change this at the current time, the waiting time should be looked upon as an opportunity to inform and educate students in a variety of ways. PowerPoint presentations or videos may be shown. Catalogs and important hard copy orientation materials may be disseminated. Campus offices and area organizations may be present to provide appropriate information necessary for success at University X.

Education and assessment is an important component to this new program. Student evaluations will be accepted anytime after students register for classes – while they visit with Financial Aid, obtain their student ID, etc Drop boxes will be visibly available at these locations. Likewise, sample student focus groups could be called for further evaluations. The implementation of this new program will hopefully lead to an increase in student retention over the course of the academic year. An unforeseen but possible addition benefit would also include the enhancement of student leadership skills by providing current students a mentoring experience from interacting with new students.

The enhancement to the registration process could also be used as a marketing tool for University X. Although the stigma is changing, many community colleges across the country are still not considered real colleges. At University X, many of our students are often referred to as attending the 13th grade, indicating that their peers do not view attending a community college as a valid college experience. Implementing the comprehensive orientation program may assist with student retention from year to year with an increase of student graduation or transfers to four-year institutions.

ANALYSIS OF COST VERSUS BENEFITS

The benefits of implementing this new comprehensive approach to New Student Orientation will outweigh the costs. Obviously, data would need to be gathered – from a longitudinal cost / benefit analysis – to support this claim. However, the following table illustrates the possible choices University X has when it comes to the comprehensive orientation program.

Table 1: Comparison of Staffing Resources with Proposed Changes to Orientation / Registration Process at University X

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Status <i>Staffing Resources</i>	Current Registration Process	Registration with Enhanced Orientation Components
<i>Remain the Same</i>	Mundane and Disorganized	Disorganized and ineffective due to lack of collaboration and staffing resources
<i>Collaborate Across Campus</i>	Organized but lack of orientation component prolongs student wait time.	Organized and efficient use of student / staff time by utilizing opportunity of student presence on campus to inform students of vital and pertinent information.

From this information, it appears that the registration experience with enhanced orientation components will be most effective with faculty and staff collaboration across campus. Unless collaboration occurs, it appears that the attempt of incorporating aspects of orientation will be completed in vain. Further research providing details such as the number of participants, survey tools, and validity and / or reliability of the intervention will be needed and analysis of the effectiveness of the program could be studied over time. The inclusion of an executive summary at the completion of the period of study would certainly strengthen the programs impact.

FORESEEN CONCERNS

The President of University X charged both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs to produce an on-going, more comprehensive orientation program in order to directly address the need for student retention. Although orientation events have been a collaborative effort in the past, the Office of Student Services has historically overseen the logistical process. However, in recent years, the orientation experience has become more academic in nature providing information and guidance regarding academic programs, administrative processes, campus services, facilities and co-curricular programs (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005).

Maintaining an adequate and meaningful orientation is the responsibility of many departments across campus. Mullendore and Banahan (2005) cite a number of recent trends that have emerged in orientation practices. They include faculty involvement in orientation programs, academic program emphasis, parent and family attendance, student attendance, and technology. Be that as it may, when the President gave the charge, University X looked to the Office of Student Services to single-handedly re-work orientation. However, once the above-mentioned proposal was presented for consideration, it was frowned upon given the amount of resources each office was expected to undertake. The question remains: how does someone create a program when resources are needed yet clearly not allotted equally?

PHILOSOPHICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE PROGRAM / SPECIAL INSIGHT

My justification for these changes is rooted in student retention literature. College and university campuses are the foundation on which students can grow and connect to reach his or her fullest ability, both in and outside of the classroom setting. The *Wingspread Group* of 1993 supported this claim by stating that professionals in higher education must make student learning a priority. Likewise, *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association, 1994) challenged professionals to reaffirm their

commitment to student learning and development. Coming to college has become an organized adventure, with individuals strategically placed in students ways as to direct and guide their learning. The enhancements to registration are one such intentional program. Students may learn that the goal is to not only earn a degree, but to also take the opportunity and fully explore the possibilities that they have at University X (Shupp, 2005).

Many students experience two separate, distinct aspects of the college experience. They experience traditional academic learning, which consists of classrooms, books, professors, tests, papers, and homework. They also experience the non-academic side, which often consists of residential living, club-sports, student activities, and social engagements. However, as student affairs professionals, faculty, and staff, it is our obligation to unite the two. What was once believed to be separate, distinct entities now need to be bound together so as to appear whole and continuous (Kuh, 1996). This represents Kuhs aspect of *seamless learning*. In his estimation, one experience is not more important than the other. Having both fall on an even plane suggests students will have the most well-rounded experience. The two pieces of the puzzle must be put together (Shupp, 2005).

According to the Student Personnel Point of View (1937), it is the obligation of educational institutions to consider the student as a whole (p. 39). Institutions have a primary responsibility to influence a student emotionally, socially, academically, personally, and spiritually. This can be accomplished through proactive, intentional collaboration by academia coming into non-traditional academic settings to teach class material. Without the cooperation of all university departments, the student will not be able to reach his or her fullest potential (Shupp, 2005).

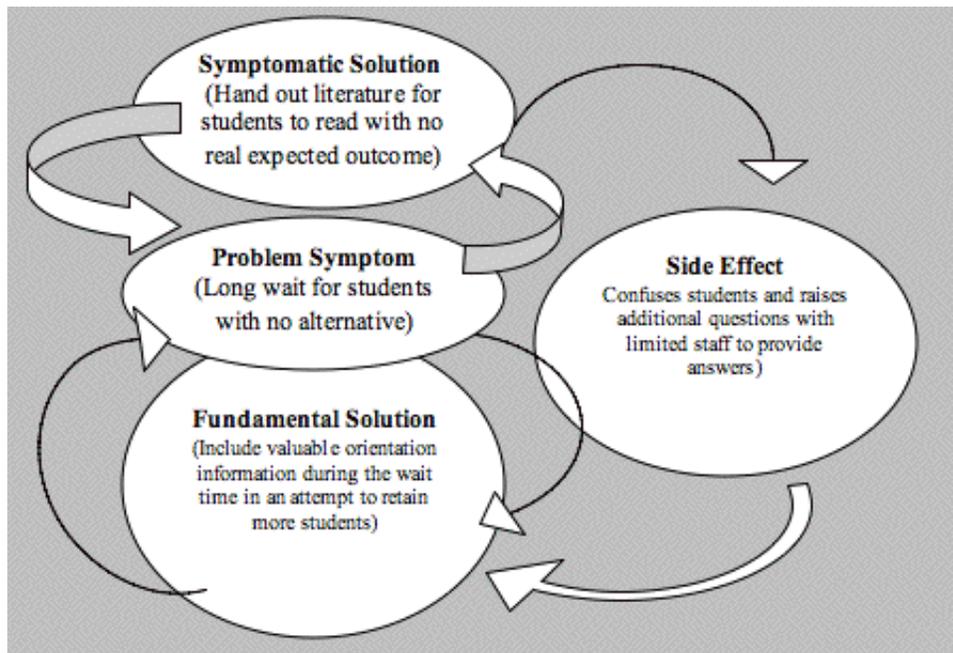
ISSUES THAT WILL ARISE

Following Peter Senge's archetypes as a model, I foresee that the proposed orientation program may fail for two reasons: *Shifting the Burden* and *Fixes That Fail* (1990). Although the orientation program is solidly grounded in orientation theory and literature, actual follow-through of the program will compete with individual agendas.

Shifting the Burden archetype states that a problem symptom can be resolved either by using a symptomatic solution or applying a fundamental solution. The archetype hypothesizes that once a symptomatic solution is used, it alleviates the problem symptom and reduces pressure to implement a more fundamental solution. The symptomatic solution also produces a side effect that systematically undermines the ability to develop a fundamental solution or capability (Senge, 1990).

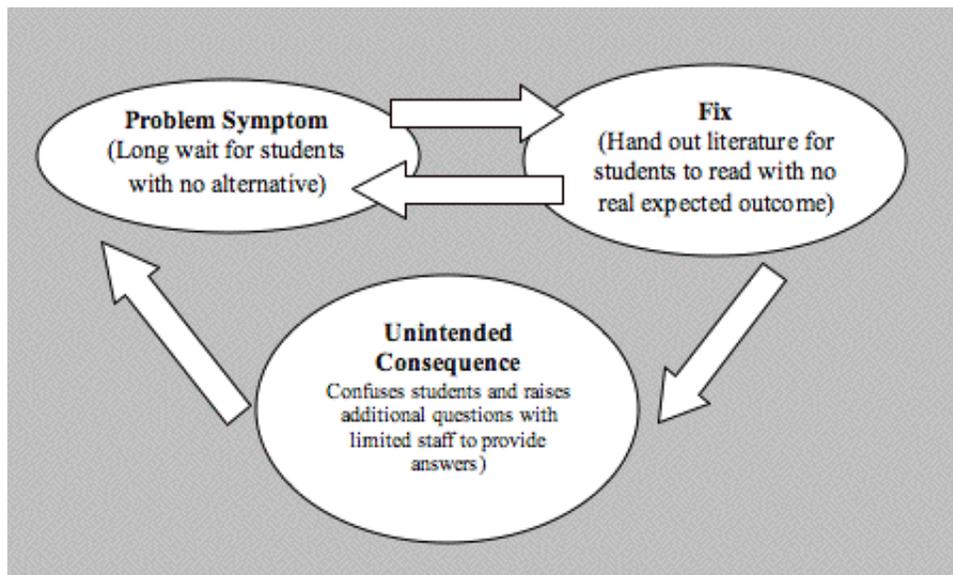
In my particular example, the registration process has put a band-aid, a temporary solution, on the problems occurring with registration without taking a broad perspective on the fundamental problems that exist. The quick-fix solution to the long lines and extensive wait time was not an aggressive, comprehensive approach, but rather a lackadaisical bandage that kept the current program in place.

Figure 2: SHIFTING THE BURDEN



Likewise, the *Fixes That Fail* archetype states that a quick-fix solution can have unintended consequences which will sustain the problem. It hypothesizes that the problem symptom will diminish for a short while and then return to its previous level, or become even worse over time (Senge, 1990). As stated above, without taking a broad perspective on the fundamental problems that exist with the current registration process, temporary solutions will only exacerbate the problem. The following illustration is used for my particular example:

Figure 3: FIXES THAT FAIL



ARGUMENTATIVE RESERVES

There are several questions that may come up from the initiation of this comprehensive orientation program. For example, would most faculty currently involved with the fall and spring orientation events be willing to assist with a more on-going orientation approach? Likewise, if the faculty does participate, will

they request extended or release time for their participation? The current contract for faculty and classified employees states that they would be given release or extended time for additional work that is taken on in addition to their assigned duties. Therefore, overall participation of faculty and classified employees may need to wait until next year when contract negotiations take place. However, this does not impact the use of non-unionized staff collaborating and assisting with the implementation of the proposed program.

Critics may also ask whether or not research has been conducted on the perceived need for such an ongoing program. In other words, is student retention and attrition a national problem? If so, have programs such as this been documented as successfully assisting with student retention at other colleges and universities? I will also need to be aware of critics suggesting that I may be focusing on the wrong program. In order to counter these concerns, an argument needs to be well-established citing that persistence rates, most notably at community colleges, are affected by the following factors:

Students are often first generation college students;

Students often encounter English as a second language;

Students often work more than 20 hours a week;

Students take care of children or relatives as the primary caregiver; and

Students may have only completed remedial courses (Shupp, 2005).

I need to be prepared for the criticism that this program may not increase the number of students retained at University X. The fact remains that a magic formula does not yet exist that shows a causal relationship between one specific program implementation and student retention rates. Perhaps this program is the start. I truly believe that this collaborative approach to orientation could be accepted and make a positive impact on student retention. The true test would come upon the completion of the first year to see how many students University X retained, and whether or not they felt that the ongoing orientation program had anything to do with their success.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to members of the University X New Student Orientation Comprehensive Orientation Planning Team to whom much of the Overview section is credited. Without their insight, this portion of the paper would be less than it is.

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