Chapter 6

Establishing Pathways for Transfer Student Success Through Orientation

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Creating a Case for Transfer Orientation

Transfer students have been called the forgotten students (Jacobs, 2004), and they are indeed often an afterthought when planning orientation programs. Formal orientation programs for first-year students have been offered since the end of the 19th century; however, creating comparable programs for transfer students is a relatively new phenomenon. Transfer orientation was once a bland reimagining of first-year orientation—at times replete with the official university representative welcome supplemented by an out-of-date PowerPoint presentation referencing “your first-year experience.” Thankfully, transfer orientation has evolved as educators have become better versed in the unique characteristics and needs of transfer students. Orientation is now viewed as a valuable tool for retaining students and assisting them toward baccalaureate degree completion and the vehicle by which expectations for success are established. Institutional benefits of a strong transfer orientation program include creating a consistent campus culture, meeting new requirements for reporting transfer success, and building a strong alumni base.

While transfer students swirl in and out of two- and four-year institutions, many of them still migrate from community colleges to universities. Further, the number of students entering higher education through the community college route has dramatically increased, and that surge in numbers is expected to continue (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). As this population increases, the urgency of providing transition initiatives tailored to their needs becomes even more imperative. Simply put, the United States will not regain its status as the most educated country in the world unless transfer students are successful. Because orientation continues to be an effective transition tool for all students, specialized experiences for transfer students are an important higher education initiative.

As admissions is the gateway to the university, so orientation serves as the pathway for transfer student success. Mullendore and Banahan (2005) affirm that “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” (p. 391). Guided by the belief that facilitating the transfer transition is a collective university responsibility that commences with, and extends beyond, the parameters of the orientation program, this chapter explores the many facets of transfer orientation planning and implementation while offering practical examples and resources.

Orientation: As Diverse as Our Transfer Students

As established in previous chapters, the experiences and needs of transfer students can be vastly dissimilar. In response, transfer orientation programs must reflect this diversity and not adhere to a single format. Creating a variety of orientation opportunities, determining whether orientation
should be mandatory, and deciding which campus departments should have responsibility for the various aspects of orientation are essential steps to creating a comprehensive transfer orientation program.

The Importance of Options

Because the academic and social needs of transfer students vary significantly from first-year students and within the transfer population, it is important to create multiple options for orientation. Building flexibility into transfer orientation displays a commitment to the individual and his or her life circumstances. Offering transfer students a choice of quality programs can also minimize the reluctance to attend “another orientation”—a common sentiment among students who do not feel they need to be re-oriented to college or indoctrinated into the campus culture. Specific examples of transfer orientation variations are offered later in the chapter.

Mandated Versus Optional Programs

A logical question that arises early in transfer orientation discussions is whether a program should be optional or compulsory. The answer is often been rooted in institutional philosophy and/or history; nonetheless, the authors assert that mandating attendance at transfer orientation is a win-win situation for the student and the university. A mandatory program has the power to create culture shifts and influence perceptions. It is a vehicle by which the institution can communicate consistent expectations for student behavior and success, promulgate the university mission, and establish a loyal alumni base. By mandating transfer orientation, whether on campus, online, or a combination of both, the university is demonstrating dedication to reaching out to every new transfer student, shepherding them through their transition, and equipping them with the tools to succeed.

For institutions that may not be in a position to mandate attendance due to limited resources, restrictions on fees, philosophical disagreements, or other factors, it is critical that all communication with prospective transfer students strongly encourage participation. Such messages welcoming new transfers into the university community should extol the benefits of attendance, including (a) more agile navigation of university processes; (b) centralized access to student services personnel; (c) interaction with current and other new transfer students; and (d) advanced advising and registration opportunities, if appropriate. It is also important that transfer students feel as if their current experience is valued and will be important in their future success.

Determining the Best Approach for the Institution

Related to the decision to mandate orientation is determining which area(s) on campus will be responsible for organizing and executing transfer orientation. Research into current transfer orientation programs reflects a variety of scenarios, including (a) centralized efforts originating in student affairs (new student programs), enrollment management (admissions), or academic affairs (transfer centers); (b) decentralized programs organized independently by academic colleges and schools; or (c) a combined approach delegating the academic and student development aspects to their respective divisions. Abraham, Nesbit, and Ward-Roof (2003) assert that “the orientation function should report through the division of student affairs or have significant input from student affairs staff” (p.70). Specifically, the authors cite student affairs professionals’ knowledge of student development theory and campus organization and operation; proficiency in program design and assessment; and expertise in selecting, training, and evaluating student leaders as critical to the development and execution of a successful orientation program. They also recommend that
decentralized orientation efforts offer a companion, university-wide program to meet the needs of students with undeclared majors and ensure adequate exposure to campus services. Regardless of the unification or decentralization of orientation responsibility, it is imperative that the university present a cohesive vision for orientation and ensure that similar messages pertaining to student expectations, university mission, and campus culture are being communicated and that policies are consistently enforced. Doing so requires open communication among, and collaboration from, all departments involved in orientation planning and programming.

Campus Collaboration: Creating a Unified Approach

Orientation directors are at times analogous to public servants in that their constituent base is broad and often comprised of outspoken critics. This does not mean that program goals cannot be collectively advanced; however, it does require creativity and significant communication. A useful way to encourage collaboration and develop a shared vision is by creating an orientation planning committee comprised of representatives from departments including, but not limited to, new student programs, academic advising, the transfer center, testing, financial aid, admissions, registrar, international programs, housing, student activities, athletics, veterans programs, and TRIO programs. The committee would also benefit from the participation of current transfer students. The committee’s charge can range from advisory to action-empowered, and its cross-functional composition allows for all aspects of the transfer process to be represented. Additionally, the orientation director must ensure that members of the committee are well-versed in the transfer transition literature and serve as transfer success advocates in the university community.

Creating Robust, Intentional Programs

To provide a context for program development, The Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has developed a set of standards for orientation programs. Updated in 2008 and endorsed by the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA), the standards provide criteria to evaluate the quality and appropriateness of orientation programs, including student learning and development outcomes. According to these standards, an orientation program, at its very core, must be

- Integrated into the life of the institution
- Intentional and coherent
- Guided by theories and knowledge of learning and development
- Reflective of developmental and demographic profiles of the student population
- Responsive to needs of individuals, diverse and special populations, and relevant constituencies (CAS, 2008, p. 4)

These underlying principles should be used to create orientation options that support the transfer transition.

When developing a comprehensive orientation program, it is important to remember that transfer students want to be recognized as experienced college students. At the same time, they still have a great amount to learn about the new environment they are entering. The unfamiliarity of their situation may create feelings of being a first-year student again, but they certainly do not wish to be treated as recent high school graduates (Townsend, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative
that intentional efforts be made to address important university information and provide transition opportunities in ways that appeal to seasoned students.

Identifying the Transfer Population

To ensure the orientation program is reflective of the developmental and demographic profiles of new transfers and that appropriate messages and methods of dissemination are used, orientation professionals must first create an accurate portrait of their transfer student population. It is important not to rely solely on national transfer statistics, as they may not accurately reflect a specific institution’s transfer population. For example, in 2001, the University of North Texas (UNT) set out to create a transfer class portrait. With assistance from the Office of Planning and Institutional Research, it was determined that a typical UNT transfer student was between 19-24 years of age, entered as a sophomore, had not declared a major, and was interested in becoming involved on campus. This profile contradicted faculty and staff perceptions of this population as presented in the then-limited transfer literature, which asserted transfer students are older, advanced undergraduates interested in completing their current course of study and too busy with family and work to participate in campus activities. As such, it took repeated and targeted efforts over several years to reeducate the campus community and recalibrate the transfer orientation program to more appropriately serve these students.

Using institutional research (IR) data is an ideal method of capturing transfer student characteristics and countering campus myths. Suggestions for working with the IR office, or similar entity, include

- Developing a clear sense of the data to be collected or questions to be answered. Rather than asking for statistics on the incoming transfer class, request specific variables, such as gender; ethnicity; first-generation status; number of hours transferring into the university and from which institution(s); intended majors, if declared; academic college or school of enrollment; age or year graduated from high school; intentions to work; and full-time/part-time status.
- Ensuring that the questions being asked are complementary to the university’s mission. For example, if the institution only accepts transfer students with 30 or more credit hours, do not request information on students not meeting this requirement.
- Making requests for data interpretation at the time of the data acquisition request. IR offices often lack the human resources to interpret every requested data set. Therefore, the expectation is that the data will be interpreted by the requesting party. If the data are to be interpreted, in addition to reported, specify this along with the data request and be prepared to find outside assistance if necessary.
- Allowing ample time for data reports to be generated. IR departments answer to a large constituency and produce significant output. Therefore, orientation planners should understand that any request will likely fall into a queue built upon university priority and set program launch timelines accordingly. If more timely feedback is required, requests may need to be scaled back or alternative resources (i.e., the annual fact book) consulted.

Shaping Appropriate Expectations

Successful transfer transitions begin with creating an appropriate framework from which to operate, and a thoughtfully developed transfer orientation program can significantly shape students’ expectations. Preconceived ideas about attending orientation, and the institution as a whole, have a tremendous impact on students’ transitions. These expectations influence what transfers take away
from their orientation experience and their actual experiences once classes begin. Owens (2008) outlines three stages of transfer; the first focuses on what students expect before they transfer. Of those surveyed, 60% expect to feel marginalized and worry about navigating the system. Almost all of them (93%) expressed concerns about fitting into the university culture.

As program planners, it is important to anticipate transfer students’ expectations when outlining goals and learning outcomes for orientation. One way to ascertain insight into students’ expectations is to seek out the source by exploring enrolled transfer students’ pre-, concurrent, and postorientation experiences. Remaining current with the literature on barriers to successful transfer transitions (e.g., Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Laanan, 2007) is also critical to anticipating and shaping expectations. These expectations should be communicated based upon the university’s mission, as well as the realities of campus life. Setting appropriate expectations ranges from discussing the level of rigor to expect in the classroom to the best time to arrive and find a parking spot on the main campus. This can be accomplished via a variety of communication efforts and interactions with peers and faculty.

**Effective Communication With Transfer Students**

Transfer students should be regarded as savvy consumers experienced with college view books, websites, and campus programming. When investigating potential universities, transfer students are looking for desired majors and acceptance of credit hours earned. They are also seeking a welcoming environment that responds to their unique needs and life situations. The responsibility for providing transfers with accurate, timely information that speaks to them as individuals reaches far beyond admissions; it must be a priority for all campus departments, especially those related to orientation. Therefore, orientation departments must be intentional in their communication efforts with transfers prior to, during, and after orientation to ensure that messages are appropriately tailored to and inclusive of this population. This calls for recurrent appraisal of printed and virtual materials, as well as the programmatic elements of orientation.

As the Internet becomes the primary source of information gathering, it is helpful to conduct an annual review of department websites. The following questions regarding the home page should be explored:

- Is there a link for transfer students prominently displayed on the department home page?
  
  On the university’s home page?
- Are the photos on the department’s home page reflective of the demographics of the transfer population?
- If reference is made to new students, are these individuals defined both as transitioning immediately from high school and as transitioning from other colleges and universities or the work world?
- Are the language used and the topics addressed on the home page relevant to both transfer and first-year students?

Regarding pages developed specifically for transfer orientation and services,

- What assumptions are being made about the students reading these pages?
- Do the web pages provide a collective approach to assisting transfer students by offering links to related programs and services in other departments or divisions?
- Are there opportunities for prospective and new students to hear the voices of current transfer students?
○ Is the language free of university-specific acronyms and references that may be confusing to students unfamiliar with institutional departments, policies, and practices?

Similar questions can be asked when evaluating printed materials. It is also beneficial to enlist the help of current transfer students to assess printed and virtual materials to ensure that appropriate and intended messages are being communicated.

In addition to evaluating orientation materials, it is prudent to examine the content of transfer orientation presentations intended to welcome and inform new students and family members. It is unfortunate when campus officials or departments simply substitute transfer students for first-year students without taking care to tailor comments to their audience. Again, transfer students are savvy, and such deficient efforts contribute to perceptions that the university lacks commitment to transfers. As a preventative measure, the orientation director and the staff must ensure that program contributors receive pertinent information about their target audience and that they are encouraged to adjust presentations accordingly. By synchronizing a collective view of transfer students, effective communication is enhanced.

Using Transfer Peers

Transfer orientation models are conducive to various methods of incorporating current students with transfer experience into orientation programming. Orientation directors must be intentional about how they plan to use these students in order to impact new students in positive ways and assist in their transition. Examples of incorporating transfer peer leaders include placing them in the traditional role of an orientation leader who facilitates small-group discussions, offers campus tours, and assists with the registration process. Transfer peers can also serve as mentors and ambassadors for campus departments participating in transfer orientation, answering specific questions and providing more detailed information. Hosting a student panel is also a popular programmatic element to expose new transfers to students who previously went through the transfer process. When incorporating this option, participants must have ample time to develop questions for the panelists and/or scripted questions should be available to initiate discussion.

Regardless of how transfer peers are incorporated, it is important that new students have time to talk with, or at minimum hear from, these students. Allowing the student voice to be shared is another means by which appropriate institutional and personal expectations are shaped during an orientation program. Transfer leaders and mentors are in a unique position to help new transfers anticipate potential challenges to their transition, while focusing on realistic solutions. Their insight, coupled with information about specific campus resources, can offer new students the opportunity to plan ahead, ideally easing stress related to the precarious balancing act among family, work, school, and community responsibilities.

Orientation leaders and mentors without transfer experience may have difficulty relating to transfer students and/or may perceive transfer orientation to be the less fun part of their orientation responsibilities. To address this perception and appropriately prepare all peer leaders for their interaction with new transfers, it is important that they are informed about transfer student needs, encouraged to explore transfer myths, and given demographic information about the university’s unique transfer population. Viewpoints and experiences from peer leaders and mentors who transferred into the university should be incorporated to both corroborate and challenge the information being presented. This serves as a contemporary example of the diversity and complexities of transfer students’ experiences, expectations, and needs.
Providing Faculty Interaction

Another important component of the transfer orientation planning process is incorporating student/faculty interaction. Transfer students, especially those from community colleges, may have had increased opportunities for contact with their professors, thus developing certain expectations about interfacing with university faculty. Transfer student academic adjustment is facilitated by increased knowledge of faculty expectations and perceptions of faculty as approachable (Laanan, 2007). Additionally, Cotton and Wilson (2006) assert that students are unaware of how engaging faculty can positively influence their success and need frequent encouragement to approach faculty for academic or personal assistance. Therefore, it is important that transfer orientation provides ample opportunity for formal and informal student-faculty interaction, thereby establishing a culture of open communication and support for the academic transition. Examples of meaningful interaction include faculty-facilitated small-group discussions, faculty-led tours of academic facilities with informal questions and answers, and faculty participation in the academic advising process. Suggestions for increasing faculty participation in the planning and execution of orientation include:

- **Identifying faculty members from each academic area who have a reputation for being student and transfer friendly.** These individuals often have multiple commitments so involving them in the process early is important. With a little encouragement and understanding of the process, even middle-of-the-road individuals could become transfer orientation advocates. Because these faculty members may become strong allies without over-taxing those individuals repeatedly tapped for participation, it is important to include these individuals in the process as well.

- **Inviting faculty to participate in a discussion on enriching faculty/student interaction at orientation, preferably over a meal.** Providing a dining experience creates a more comfortable atmosphere for conversation and demonstrates the value placed on participants' time and expertise.

- **Avoiding assumptions about faculty members’ understanding of transfers and transfer orientation.** It is unrealistic to expect all faculty to intuitively comprehend, or even embrace, the philosophy of orientation and its importance in the transfer student transition. Assessing a professor’s knowledge of the orientation program and the university’s transfer student population can be a useful guide in the orientation conversation. Dispelling transfer student myths and/or informing faculty on the characteristics about the incoming transfer class may also be necessary.

- **Answering the question, how will my participation in transfer orientation benefit my academic program?** Faculty members receive little compensation or recognition for their service to orientation programs. Therefore, it is important to facilitate an understanding of the benefits using language that resonates with them—cultivating better prepared students and the potential for bringing additional students into the discipline or major.

- **Offering faculty members meaningful interaction opportunities that maximize their connection with students.** Inviting faculty to facilitate a small-group discussion on classroom expectations and navigating the academic transition from the community college to a university is a more effective strategy than expecting them to mingle with students in a reception hall.

It is important to include a faculty-facilitated component in online orientations as well. This may come in the form of an academic module conducted by a faculty member or an interactive video tour of the department facilities. Highlighting faculty members’ participation in campus activities, such as sporting or fine arts events, the recreation facility, and the campus coffee shop can also encourage perceptions of approachability.
Components in Comprehensive Transfer Orientation Programs

For the purposes of this conversation, the individual components of transfer orientation will be organized into three areas: (a) academic advising and preparation; (b) campus resources, involvement, and culture; and (c) student success and personal development.

Academic Advising and Preparation

Academic advising is the cornerstone of transfer orientation and contributes to student retention (Strumpf, Sharer, & Wawrzynski, 2003). Orientation planning teams must be considerate of the fact that transfer students are often apprehensive about this process and hear little of what is presented to them prior to advising. Therefore, it would be beneficial to structure the academic portion as early in the program as possible. When feasible, it is advantageous to conduct transcript evaluations prior to orientation. This allows students to truly begin the advising process at orientation and takes more of the guesswork out of registration. Whether or not this approach is an option, it is absolutely critical to communicate to transfer students exactly what they can expect from their orientation advising experience so as to minimize frustration and allow for advanced preparation.

Typically bookending the advising process is placement testing and course registration. Placement testing at transfer orientation varies widely among institutions, with some programs incorporating it into their schedules and others requiring students to complete testing prior to orientation attendance. As with all other academic elements, it is important that new transfers receive as much information as possible about testing requirements and procedures prior to orientation so as to be sufficiently prepared.

Determining when to allow transfer students to register can be a philosophically divisive issue. One school of thought gives priority to the university’s current students, requiring transfer students to select classes near the end of the registration period. However, because transfer students may be coming to the university with advanced hours, limited course availability can impede academic major progression. Once again, the potential ramifications of institutional policy must be anticipated and appropriately communicated to students by the orientation department. The opportunity to adjust policies may not be viable, but minimizing negative effects on transfer transitions is an absolute responsibility of orientation professionals. A more transfer-friendly option allows at least one opportunity for new transfers to register along with current students based on classification. Yet another alternative registers transfers before new first-year students. Offering early registration opportunities to transfer students is another technique for getting students to attend transfer orientation, and to do so as early as possible.

Campus Resources, Involvement, and Culture

Campus resources. Whether the transfer orientation takes place on campus or virtually, a critical component is the integration of campus resource information. Because transfer students have had prior interaction with offices, such as the registrar or bursar on another campus, it is imperative that they receive timely and accurate information about services on their new campus and differences in policies and procedures. Material should be presented to honor students’ experiences, while not making assumptions about their proficiency in navigating their new environment. Of particular concern to transfer students is financial aid, especially for those individuals transferring in the spring semester when specific funds allocated for transfers may be more limited. Therefore, providing an opportunity for new students to speak with financial aid professionals is an appreciated orientation program component. Additionally, the orientation staff must be well versed in current financial aid policies and procedures as they pertain to transfers. Transfers will also benefit
from introductions to academic support services, as well as housing and residence life, commuter services, nontraditional student activities, and childcare resources.

**Curricular involvement.** One of the common myths about transfer students is that they are uninterested in becoming involved on campus. Research conducted with students transferring to four-year institutions from from community colleges appears to contradict this notion (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Additionally, transfer students' participation in campus organizations, especially those that are academically or culturally focused, facilitates social adjustment to their new environment (Laanan, 2007). Orientation is a logical time to present co-curricular options to new transfer students, but thought must be given to the appropriateness of departments and organizations to include, as well as the timing of the presentations. As stated in the previous section, academic advising is the primary objective for most transfer students, and campus involvement information will likely be better received once academic issues have been addressed.

**Introduction to the campus culture.** Similar to campus involvement, being introduced to campus spirit and traditions is often a tertiary concern of transfer students during orientation. Whether or not it is viewed as a priority by transfers, exposing new students to the history, traditions, and campus culture facilitates an identification with and integration into the institution (CAS, 2009). There are a variety of ways to incorporate these elements into orientation. Some are subtle (e.g., flashing campus traditions, campus creeds, and/or student expectations in PowerPoint presentations while students are waiting for an event to begin or placing written information in orientation materials), and others are not as subtle (e.g., teaching the fight song and alma mater during the opening session or having a current student speak to the nuances of campus culture). The point is to make new transfers feel glad that they chose this university and induct them into the campus community as soon as possible. Providing a campus tour tailored to transfer student needs also serves as a vehicle for education about campus traditions and assists in students' physical acclimation to campus.

**Student Success and Personal Development**

Imparting student success information may take a variety of formats; however, the most promising tactics appear to be organized around peer-to-peer interaction both in formal presentations and guided discussions. These sessions are often designed to encourage self-examination of intentions for coming to the university, explore goal setting and use of campus resources, and develop plans for successful navigation of the transfer transition. This type of information is better received when offered by current students rather than administrators.

**Creating connections between new students.** Transfer students are less likely to feel connected to other students due to perceived or real impressions that classmates have already developed relationships and are not interested in expanding their circle of friends (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Therefore, an essential transfer orientation program goal must be to create meaningful connections between new students. These connections can be based upon academic major, previous institution attended, geographic region, or some other shared experience or characteristic. Opportunities to interact should be intentional since students may not extend themselves to others. Since many transfer students will be spending significant time in their academic disciplines, it can be helpful to establish academic cohorts during orientation and schedule time for informal guided discussions within these groups. Students should be encouraged to exchange e-mail addresses with at least two fellow orientees to encourage continued contact during the transition process.
Transfer Orientation Models

When attempting to determine the most appropriate transfer orientation format(s), it is important to consider institutional mission and priorities, as well as the composition of the transfer class. Integrating insight from Smith and Brackin (2003) and Handel (2007), the following questions are offered for consideration:

◇ How many transfer students are accepted each term, and what percentage of the entire new student cohort do they represent?
◇ How assertively does the institution recruit transfer students?
◇ What are the minimum acceptance requirements and graduation rates for transfer students?
◇ From which institutions are students transferring, and how many credits are they typically holding?
◇ What functional areas are responsible for transfer students, and how collaboratively do they operate?
◇ What resources are allocated for transfer student transitions?
◇ How committed are faculty, staff, and administrators to the orientation program?
◇ When are transfer students most likely to attend an orientation session? Do these times coincide with what the institution can offer?
◇ Is the institution prepared to offer an online orientation option?

Answers to these questions, coupled with program evaluation and assessment results will guide model selection. As consideration is given to the organization of the program, it is also prudent to examine how the program is titled. Transfer students may balk at the idea of attending another college orientation, preferring instead to attend a transfer transitions session (Flaga, 2006).

As institutions creatively respond to transfer student needs, orientation options are constantly evolving. Brief descriptions of current models are presented below, in no particular order. It is important to note that the most common orientation formats and components may not be the best choice for all campuses, making it paramount to tailor the orientation program to the specific institution and its transfer students.

One Day

A review of institutional transfer orientation programs confirms that a one-day, on-campus orientation is the most frequently offered option (National Orientation Directors Association [NODA], 2009; National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2009). Formats include half- and whole-day options, depending upon program goals. Almost all include advising and registration components, with student services information and campus tours incorporated to varying degrees. Orientation dates may be organized by academic areas with certain sessions open to designated majors only.

Online and Blended

In response to the diversity of transfer students’ academic backgrounds, needs, and expectations, more institutions are moving to online orientation programs or blended models of online and on-campus programs. Page (2009) surveyed the NODA membership and learned that virtual orientation formats are now being used across institutional type and size. In the study, two primary formats targeting transfer students emerged: (a) pre-orientation and (b) alternative orientation. As a complement to on-campus orientation, the pre-orientation format allows institutions to share
pertinent information with students in preparation for attending the on-campus portion of orientation. Page identifies institutions using this format, including Washtenaw Community College and Tallahassee Community College. The alternative orientation format is designed to accommodate students unable to attend an on-campus orientation session and is a good choice when no other option to orientation attendance exists. Institutions cited by Page using this format were DePaul University and the University of California-Berkeley. The University of Minnesota-Twin Cities was featured for its outstanding online orientation program grounded in offering students’ choices based on their “experiences, learning styles, and needs” (Page, p. 2). This program allows students to attend a full-day transfer orientation session or a half-day, on-campus session complemented by a pre-orientation online program complete with quizzes.

Multiday

The multiday orientation model is designed to appeal to transfers desiring a more community-oriented introduction to the university. Patterned after traditional approaches to first-year orientation, these programs are steeped in campus traditions, focus heavily on developing university pride and spirit, and often offer an overnight option. Multiday programs also enhance engagement with other new transfer students through social events and increased time in small group activities, and provide additional opportunities to interact with faculty members.

Satellite Location

In an attempt to be more accommodating to community college students, university orientation programs are at times hosted on community college campuses. While this type of orientation may lose some of the focus on campus connections, it can also provide the opportunity for a team of university representatives and peer leaders to share information about services and campus life.

Weekend and Evening

Weekend and evening orientation programs demonstrate the university’s commitment to working transfer students by offering services outside of regular business hours. Provisions for childcare should be considered for this type of orientation programming.

Extended Orientation and Involvement Opportunities

Establishing a pathway for transfer student success does not end with orientation but rather is a process that spans pre-enrollment, entry, and postmatriculation. Additionally, results from the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) comparing native seniors with transfer seniors, indicate transfer seniors were “less involved in active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, and enriching educational experiences, and they viewed their campus environments as less supportive” (p.15), suggesting that early and extended involvement opportunities may benefit transfer students and the institution. A discussion of extended orientation and involvement opportunities follows.

Transition camps. Transition camps extend the pride and tradition, student success, and campus resource elements of transfer orientation in an off-campus setting, which can include a traditional summer camp, a wilderness adventure, an overseas experience, or any other creative venue that facilitates a more intimate introduction to the university and fellow students. Texas A&M University has an established reputation for excellence in transition camp programming and offers
new fall transfers the opportunity to participate in T-camp where students are welcomed into the Aggie family and introduced to university traditions and opportunities.

**Welcome weeks.** Traditionally, welcome weeks are hosted prior to the start of the semester, with some overlap into the first week of school. Institutions admitting large spring classes, such as the University of South Carolina and the University of South Florida, host a second welcome week in January to assist transfer students' transition. Specific transfer programming is being added to complement the traditional educational, developmental, and social activities. A transfer student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, offered this perspective on his welcome week experience:

I remember my excitement to find out that there was a welcome event just for transfer students... I think at some basic level, the mere knowledge that there was someone at the University thinking of transfer students and creating programs specifically for them was comforting. Those comforts, along with time, helped me acclimate more quickly and thoroughly to a new campus than I ever thought I could. (Herman, 2008, p. 11)

**Transfer peer mentors.** Peer mentors can play a significant role beyond the actual orientation program, and orientation leaders often continue working with new transfer students in this manner. A review of transfer peer mentor programs reveals a popular university-wide programmatic approach that matches an upper-class transfer student with a new transfer to assist with the transition process. The State University of New York College at Oswego recently implemented just such a program. Recruitment of new transfer students into the program occurs during the first two weeks of the semester as students are experiencing the challenges of their new environments, rather than at orientation (Lipka, 2008). Peer mentors have also been used effectively in academic departments to acclimate transfers to their majors. This approach is particularly desirable for those transfers who come to the institution with advanced academic standing and are committed to their degree path. Compensation for the mentors may involve a small scholarship, stipend, or hourly wage. Additionally, mentors may volunteer their time.

**Tau Sigma Honor Society.** Academically accomplished community college transfer students familiar with Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society may come to their new institutions looking for a similar cocurricular opportunity for honors students. Fortunately, Tau Sigma National Honor Society was established at Auburn University in 1999 to “recognize and promote the academic excellence and involvement of transfer students” (Tau Sigma National Honor Society, 2007, para. 1) and now recognizes more than 70 chapters nationally. Tau Sigma chapters often serve as a recruiting source for transfer orientation leaders and peer mentors.

**Transfer newsletter.** The University of Nebraska-Lincoln engages their transfer students throughout their first two semesters via an ongoing electronic orientation and e-newsletter, The Transfer Connection. Sent weekly to more than 1,400 transfers, it encourages dialogue on a variety of academic topics, highlights campus services, and purportedly builds relationships with university staff and other transfer students (Moseman, 2006).

**Workshop series.** To address transfer needs as they develop throughout the semester, many campuses create a series of presentations on topics such as balancing school-family-work obligations, stress and financial management, study skills, and getting the most from an academic major. These workshops are frequently coordinated by one department but rely on the larger campus community for program execution. It is important to monitor the learning outcomes of these programs and to make adjustments as needed to ensure the appropriateness of workshop topics and expended resources.
Orientating Special Transfer Populations

In addition to serving the needs of individual transfer students, orientation must also respond to the needs of diverse and special populations (CAS, 2009). Traditional orientation programming considerations for students with disabilities, international students, minorities, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered students, commuting and nontraditional students, athletes, and honors students are well documented (Hatch, 2003; Hatch & Skipper, 2004; Jacobs & Bowman, 2003) and will not be detailed in this chapter. However, the parents and/or family members of incoming transfers warrant additional attention.

Parents and Families

According to the CAS Standards (2008), orientation programs must aid students and their families (i.e., parents, guardians, partners, and children) in understanding the nature and purpose of the institution, their membership in the academic community, and their relationship to the intellectual, cultural, and social climate of the institution. (p. 4)

A common misconception is that parents of transfer students are not interested in attending orientation programs. In reality, with the average age of community college students dropping to the more traditional college age of 18 to 24 (Handel, 2007), it stands to reason that more parents and family members are electing to attend optional family programming. Universities are taking steps to make orientation more family-friendly by offering parallel programs for children of adult students and by being inclusive of significant others in addition to parents. Through these efforts, institutions can send a clear message that parent and family members are valued partners in the student’s educational success, as well as demonstrate respect for the intimate knowledge these individuals have of their students (Austin, 2003). Parental support, especially for first-generation students who comprise a significant proportion of the nation’s transfer population, is critical for transfer student success. Creating a partnership with families and communicating appropriate expectations is intended to decrease the multiple pressures often placed upon transfers.

Assessing Transfer Orientation Success

Comprehensively assessing transfer orientation is a multifaceted process involving both program self-assessment and program evaluation. Self-assessments are conducted to ensure that universal standards and intended program goals and outcomes are being met. This exercise should be inclusive of all orientation constituents and requires significant time and effort. All self-assessments should begin with a review of the CAS Standards for orientation. Two additional self-assessment resources are discussed in more detail below: (a) Institutional Audit of Policies, Practices, and Attitudes Affecting Transfer (IPKIT) and (b) Foundations of Excellence Transfer Focus.

Another element of assessing the transfer orientation program is evaluating satisfaction with program content and process and measuring learning outcomes. A large circle of stakeholders should be included in the evaluation process, which is most productively executed in close proximity to the conclusion of each orientation session and/or event. All aspects of the planning and implementation process should be evaluated, including communication with participants and campus departments. Student orientation staff need to have the opportunity to evaluate the program, their training, and their own learning outcomes. Technology can play a role in well designed and executed evaluations through the use of online assessment tools. This administration method allows
for expansive distribution and ease of data collection and analysis. Assessment savvy individuals
can design their own surveys using subscription programs, such as SurveyMonkey and Zoomerang.
Others can take advantage of professional assessment companies, such as StudentVoice, which offer
campuses assistance in creating instruments, as well as data warehousing and student tracking.

**Comprehensive Self-Assessment Resources**

**CAS Standards.** The importance of using the CAS Standards in all orientation program review
and assessment processes cannot be overemphasized. Resources introducing the standards, discussing self-assessment, and outlining methods of program evaluation can be found online (CAS, 2010).
Additionally, the University of North Texas has developed an interactive, web-based tool (i.e., CAS Dashboard) to increase the efficiency of staff time to complete the CAS process, automate the data entry process, and produce quantitative and qualitative reports (Hillman, 2009).

**Institutional Audit of Policies, Practices, and Attitudes Affecting Transfer (IPKIT).** Developed through a grant from The Lumina Foundation, IPKIT is not orientation specific, but it is a helpful tool for transfer professionals. This set of five modules provides “the knowledge and skills to gather and analyze institution-specific data on transfer student preparation, the transfer process, and student behavior after transfer” (University of Missouri, 2009, para. 6). The modules may be used independently or in tandem with the goal of improving transfer policies, support programs, and baccalaureate degree attainment. Results of an IPKIT assessment can be incorporated into university-wide transfer discussions and serve an integral role in the institutional orientation planning committee’s agenda.

**Foundations of Excellence Transfer Focus.** Campuses can also choose to participate in the Foundations of Excellence Transfer Focus, an in-depth self-study and action-planning process that assists universities in understanding how they facilitate transfer student success. Administered by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (2009), the process includes nine Foundational Dimensions. Again, data gathered through the self-assessment can be incorporated into university-wide transfer discussions and serve an integral role in the institutional orientation planning committee’s agenda.

**Program Evolution**

Once all assessment data have been collected and analyzed, the next step is to determine which components of the orientation process worked and which did not live up to expectations. Rather than simply accepting the feedback at face value, it is important to critically examine the possible contributing factors to the outcomes, both positive and negative. For example, if students reported poor satisfaction with the on-site, online registration portion of orientation, it would be prudent to further explore their experiences in the computer labs. Were there sufficient terminals to keep waiting time manageable? Were staff available to help navigate the registration system? Were students able to secure desired courses, or were many of their sections already closed? Having a broad understanding of the contributing factors will be helpful in making future program alterations.

Whether executing minor adjustments or contemplating a format redesign, determining when to make changes is one of the challenges to transfer orientation planning and evaluation. A reexamination of transfer demographics; changes in state or institutional transfer policies; logistical considerations, such as facilities and calendar dates; and the introduction of new technologies, coupled with program assessment should drive decisions. It is also wise to involve as many campus constituents as possible, or appropriate, in the conversation so as to fully explore the implications of altering the program and address any opposition early in the process.
Conclusion

Orientation is a critical first step in transfer students' transition to their new academic environment. As such, significant responsibility rests with orientation planning teams to ensure that these individuals are given all opportunities to succeed. To maximize success, transfer students need involvement opportunities; information that is pertinent, accurate, timely, and clear; support from peers, staff, and advisors; acknowledgement of previous experience and accomplishments; and competency to responsibly assume control of their success (Mitchell, 2007). Each of these needs can be met through a well-designed, comprehensive transfer orientation program rooted in the mission of the institution that begins upon acceptance and extends beyond the physical orientation event. Program planning requires (a) campus collaboration, (b) specific knowledge of the transfer population, (c) the inclusion of faculty and peer interaction, and (d) a rigorous assessment and evaluation process to construct orientation options that appropriately shape students' expectations and facilitate solid pathways for student success. This chapter’s appendix includes a checklist to use when planning transfer orientation.

The responsibility for transfer success and graduation is a shared one—between sending and receiving institutions and among faculty, staff, enrollment management, institutional research, and the orientation staff. No matter how strong the intentions, transfer success will not thrive in an isolated, silo-driven environment. New student orientation staff have for decades been strong facilitators of campus-wide efforts that involve a variety of individuals with myriad goals and agendas. It is no surprise that great strides are being made in the transfer orientation arena. In this rapidly changing field of higher education, a primary challenge for orientation professionals is to anticipate changes in the transfer student population and their resulting orientation requirements. The days of offering a thinly disguised first-year student orientation program to transfers with little regard for their unique needs have passed.

Transfer students compose a critical mass in higher education. Because transfer orientation serves a very diverse and growing student population, it influences the capacity for states and regions to educate a higher percentage of the populace and reach statewide postsecondary educational goals. Additionally, it may be a critical element in meeting the goals of the 2009 American Graduation Initiative, which seeks to return the United States to educational prominence in the world by 2020 by having the highest proportion of students graduating from college (White House, 2009).

References


