A standardised orientation program for first year undergraduate students in the College of Health and Science at UWS. A Practice Report

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Abstract

First year students often feel ill-equipped academically and emotionally, hindering their integration and adjustment into university life. This report describes a standardised orientation program for first year undergraduate students focusing on peer and academic support based on "just-in-time" and "just-for-me" principles, assisting commencing students to achieve a smooth transition into university. This initiative has been employed since 2009, in one of the three large colleges at the University of Western Sydney, to foster a sense of community and reduce stress among commencing students. Building on existing orientation activities, we introduced three new activities which focused on "just-in-time" information for the first year: first semester experience, incorporation of student presentations and the inclusion of ice-breaker activities. Evaluative feedback revealed strong academic support for the initiatives, with College of Health and Science students reporting their orientation experience significantly more positively than students from the other two colleges.

Introduction and background

First year student attrition rates in higher education institutions are a pervading problem both locally and internationally (Andrew et al., 2008). Quality orientation programs and peer involvement in programs have been shown to improve retention (Davig & Spain, 2004; Ramsburg, 2007). In 2005-2006, the University of Western Sydney (UWS) undertook a university-wide retention project with the quality of student orientation as one of six action areas identified for improvement (Scott, Shah, Grebennikov & Singh, 2008). Subsequently the College of Health and Science (CHS), one of three large multidisciplinary colleges within UWS, implemented a standardised, integrated orientation program across all its undergraduate programs.

The college consists of six large schools spread over four campuses who together offer 33 distinct undergraduate programs, with some offered across multiple campuses. Around 4,000 new students commence courses in the college each year. A review revealed that orientation programs and practices varied widely across and within schools, as did understandings of the goals of orientation, individual's roles and appropriate evidence-based approaches. The university's Student Services Division (SSD) organised orientation sessions and had implemented a number of best practice initiatives. However, though all programs participated in orientation with pockets of best practice evident, the coordination and cooperation with SSD was very variable and largely dependent on the personal interest of the individual Head of Program (HOP). This is consistent with the Krause, Hartley, James, and McInnis (2005, p. 89) observation that programs "tend to be piecemeal ... developed and sustained by individuals or small groups."

CHS aimed to provide an "integrated, coordinated and intentional" (Kift, 2008, p. 1) approach to our first year support activities. It was implicitly recognised that not all academics would be familiar with the extensive literature and best practice principles and that this agenda inevitably competed with others. If we wanted our students' orientation to reflect best practice, then we needed to make this easy for colleagues to achieve by providing clear guidelines, administrative support and resources. Thus we sought to strengthen existing approaches, underpinned by evidence that orientation programs that are supportive, nurturing and contextualised to "just-in-time" and "just-for-me" principles, allay anxiety and empower students to be an active participant, and foster a sense of community and belonging with the formation of strong peer and academic support networks (Davig & Spain, 2004; Krause, 2005a, 2005b; Mayhew, Vanderlinden & Kim, 2010). A standardised, evidence-based program plan was developed by a college-wide steering group with representation from all schools and the SSD. This was resourced by the college and led by the Associate Dean Academic, with strong, explicit support from the Executive Dean.

Overview of the College Standardised Orientation Program

In addition to providing strong institutional direction and coordination, the principal feature of the program was the introduction of three new standardised activities added to three retained traditional orientation activities. These are listed below:

New orientation activities introduced

- Information reduced and contextualised to the first semester, first year experience;

- Student presentations: Course and home-campus specific including a question and answer session co-facilitated by students and staff; and

- Icebreaker activity.

Traditional orientation activities maintained

- Introduction of academic and professional staff who would be teaching or supporting commencing students;

- Information about University facilities and services (8-minute DVD); and

- Campus tours led by students.

This report describes the three new orientation activities, providing for each a rationale, what was done and the expected impact and preliminary evaluation.

Evaluation methods

The UWS Ethics Committee approved the collection of data evaluating the activities. Two sources of data were used: (1) feedback from academics responsible for each course orientation who were interviewed by telephone by an independent interviewer; and (2) a university-wide survey (n=7,547) of commencing students implemented by SSD to evaluate orientation and other activities with a 9.9% response rate (n=747).

The feedback from academics was categorised and analysed against each of the activities. As only CHS implemented the standardised orientation program, we examined differences in student perception of orientation between the three colleges. Pearson Chi-square (ChiSq) test was used to test for group differences. A p-value of less than 0.05 was set for statistical significance.

New orientation activities

Information reduced and contextualised to the first semester, first year experience

Rationale: Although participation at orientation programs have been repeatedly shown to be important in helping students' adaptation to university life (Dilekmen, 2007), one of the criticisms of these programs is the overload of information students receive (Singer, 2003). Hence, this orientation program made a deliberate choice to only provide "just-in-time" information contextualised to the first semester, first year experience.

What was done: This objective of focusing only on essential "just-in-time" information was communicated to all Schools and HOPs. Clear guidelines were provided, and each specific information segment (e.g. briefing by the HOP) was restricted to 5–10 minutes each.

Expected impact and evaluation: Despite some initial resistance, feedback from academics regarding these concise and less formal information sessions were unanimously positive as exemplified by the following comments:

> It was much more organised this year [and] much more focussed on students ... far more new student friendly then it had been. I think [previously] they tended to sit down and have a lot of

stuff that really wasn't immediately relevant to them. (Academic [A]4)

Student presentations: Course and home-campus-specific, including question and answer session co-facilitated by students and staff

Rationale: Nearly four decades ago, Tough (1971) reported the importance of access to a fellow learner who is further along the same learning path (Cuthbertson, Lauder, Steele, Cleary & Bradshaw, 2004; Tough, 1971). This view was reflected in previous student feedback in SSD surveys, who stated they would have appreciated hearing from a fellow student's perspective about common problems encountered and how they solved them. Based on this information, we provided "just-for-me" information by inviting students who were enrolled in the same course, from the same home campus, to give a brief presentation about their personal account of their course experience to date. Through their shared experience and empathy, they would be able to provide meaningful encouragement and motivation.

What was done: Each HOP invited 2–3 course-specific Year 2 or Year 3 "Student Course Volunteers" from their home campus to present at their course orientation session. Each of the student volunteers was given a briefing sheet with suggested or possible questions and answers. Examples of issues covered on the briefing sheet included: "How do I register for tutorials?" and "How do I know I am enrolled in a unit?" This was intentionally brief so that students could be innovative. We included students who would be comfortable and confident in the role and who were able to give different perspectives, for example male, part-time, mature aged etc. They were asked to share experiences that would inspire and make

the commencing students feel less apprehensive.

As commencing students value hearing from and having the opportunity to meet and talk to students who are studying the course, these students also participated in a short Question and Answer session with staff and mingled with students during the morning/afternoon tea breaks.

Expected impact and evaluation: The student involvement was probably the most well received innovation by both the commencing students, as indicated by the responses during the session, and academics alike. Academics described the student presentation as the highlight of the orientation: *The thing that students really liked most of all ... they got really loud claps and I really think they appreciated someone youthful talk at their level to them* (A9). Academics also reported that students attending orientation were more likely to ask the student presenters questions: *"There seemed to be far more questions ... from the new students to the old students* (A3).

The student volunteers received a $50.00 campus book shop voucher and a letter of thanks and acknowledgement from the Executive Dean. Students valued both, particularly the letter to add to their portfolio. All students thoroughly enjoyed the experience, which added to their presentation skills, with many indicating they would have done it without remuneration. They also valued talking to students in the Question and Answer session and commented that a number of the commencing students thanked them afterwards.

Icebreaker activity

Rationale: Davig and Spain (2004) reported students find one of the most helpful aspects of orientation as meeting people. The aim of the icebreaker activity was primarily to get the students to talk to each other, but also enabled data to be collected about the students attending orientation. This data was collated, with course level graphics produced and returned to HOPs two weeks into session with a brief report entitled: *Know your students: A snapshot.* HOPs were encouraged to share and reflect on the data with staff teaching in the program, particularly first year units.

What was done: The icebreaker activity was a 20 minute session, immediately after the brief overview and staff introductions. A brief "Who Are You?" activity asked the commencing students to talk with someone they had never met before, recording responses on the sheet. The first question asked students to discuss the best DVD they had recently seen. Information collected included gender, how they travelled to university and how long it took, number of hours they intended working during session, what they were doing last year and where they hoped to be in 5 years time. They then swapped sheets and each student provided their Student Identification Number (SID) on the sheet in order to go into a prize draw to win a USB stick. There was a brief review of the activity such as identifying the most popular DVD and which students' had travelled furthest for example. All questionnaires were stored safely as per ethical guidelines.

Expected impact and evaluation: This was a really chatty, loud session that students responded well to with feedback indicating that the ice was well and truly broken! *I think they liked the activity and talking … we had a bit of humour … when we talked about the results of the activity* (A8); which appeared to enable *the students to relax a little bit. More than I had seen in previous years* (A9). Similarly, academics perceived students as being more comfortable with the session and with interacting with staff than previously.

The data provided to the HOPs was greatly appreciated. This data was largely reflective of the reported characteristics of the broader Australian student population (Long, Ferrier & Heagney, 2006) which has for decades been highlighted as an issue for student transition and curriculum planning. By providing the data at the course level, for the immediate commencing cohort, we aimed to reduce cognitive disassociation with such data as relating to an unknown, unidentified group, as opposed to known individual students with whom we are directly interacting and setting expectations. In this way we aimed to engender greater ownership, engagement with and responsiveness to the challenges which these characteristics raise.

Students' perception of usefulness

As displayed in Figure 1, student perception of the orientation within CHS was significantly more positive (ChiSq=16.11; df=1; p=.003) than for the other two colleges. We believe this is a reflection of the improvements implemented and the consistency of application across the college.

Future directions and reflections

Future directions include: (i) Refining the current program using the feedback received; (ii) Exploring further how current students could play an ongoing
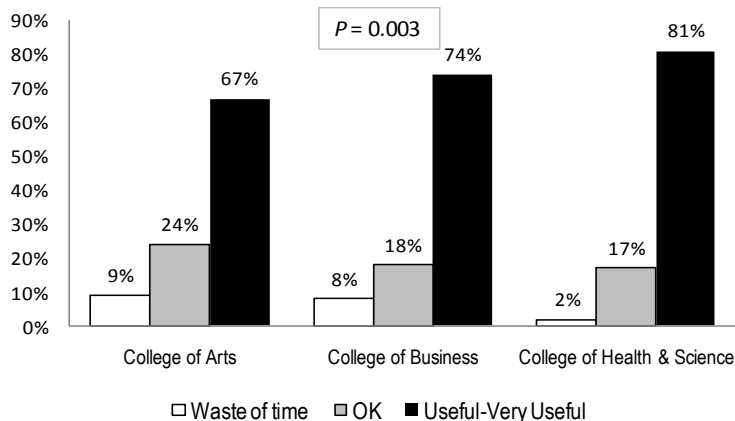
Figure 1 Comparisons of students' perception of Orientation by College

role post orientation; (iii) Extending the program to other Schools and Colleges in the University through promotion of its benefits; and (iv) Embedding strategies in all programs to provide continuing "just-in-time" messages and to ensure continuing support to students during the early weeks of their studies.

Two key factors underpinning the success of the program are (a) the high level leadership provided by the College, including consistency in messages and (b) assurance of effective and productive partnerships between schools, student services and other administrative units of the University. This has provided the organisational structure necessary to coordinate and sustain such an initiative over time (Nelson, Kift, Humphreys & Harper, 2006).

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