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University of Houston Orientation Team Leaders

FIGHTING FOR FIFTY MINUTES

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Orientation programs are challenging to plan. Between campus politics, parent and family involvement, and the variety of student experiences represented (non-traditional, home-schooled, international, transfer, etc.), it is a complex dance to orchestrate a program that adequately prepares incoming students for campus success. Moreover, as the student affairs profession examines campus climate data as it relates to cross cultural interaction and communication, a new type of diversity program is needed.

Diversity programming has evolved from pluralism to multiculturalism, from tolerance to awareness, and from acceptance to celebration. However, theory and practice has yet to get ahead of the needs of incoming students (let alone current students, staff, faculty, parents, or administrators). With varying budgets, student populations, actual timing of programming, there isn't a "one size fits all" diversity program, yet we generally accept that something is needed.

For any program, from those just beginning to add diversity programming to those that "wrote the book" on the subject, it is always a good idea to ensure that the orientation's programs goals, learning outcomes, and mission statement include a diversity or social justice education component. This can range from learning outcomes focused on students learning about various campus resources for diverse populations to a goal of supporting challenging conversations around identity and difference.

Furthermore, to ensure that the diversity-related goals of the orientation program are appropriate for the institution and its students, a social justice and diversity "advisory board" made up of student leaders and professionals from housing, the health center, the diversity office, student activities, and multicultural centers should convene before and after each orientation season. The meetings should take into account the length of orientation, the orientation leader training model, and the primary goal of orientation. These conversations may lead to new non-orientation initiatives that ultimately are more educational for students, and they can also lead to variations of the following diversity programming avenues.

The One Shot Program

Even getting "diversity discussions" to the table can be a struggle on some campuses. Finding allies on campus that will support orientation social justice programming and help develop the content is crucial to winning this battle. For orientations with limited time available, try having a facilitated conversation that shows the complexities and similarities of incoming students. This can be offered to a portion of the participants at a time and repeated multiple times on a rotational basis. These programs need to stir up ideas within each individual and also connect them to the larger group. It may be helpful to have an alum introduce the large scale program to help students see the relevance and value of self reflection in diversity programming.

In successful cases, students have reactions like the following real-life examples: "I didn't know that I wasn't the only one. Thank you for being so honest with all of us. We are a family now. We are the class of 2014. We all need a group hug! "

Stirring Up Conversation

Having a multiple-day, program-filled schedule with a variety of sessions for families and incoming students can serve as an opportunity to incorporate a variety of social justice topics. Depending on the campus climate and talent (or interest) of student staff and professionals, session topics can include, sessions on sexual identity, gender expression, dialoguing across difference, class, visible and invisible disabilities, privilege and power, and racial inequities. However, something may be needed to pull everything together. One interactive or thought-provoking keynote could be a necessary element for incoming students to grasp the concepts of intersectional and individual dominant and subordinated identities. Ideally, this conversation will lead to more questions than answers so that the student has a solid foundation to incorporate self-reflection. These skills are necessary for many students to be successful in a new setting full of a wide variety of difference.

“It’s the third week of classes and you were right – I am experiencing lots of new things and different people while I am also learning more about myself living on my own. It’s my responsibility to listen to others going through a similar experience as me and understand the differences.”

On-going and Overall Theme

Concepts of social justice can also be threaded through the entire orientation schedule. Starting with Orientation Leader training, multiple workshops and conversations can assist in the paraprofessional staff’s skills to represent and role model dialog across difference. By highlighting difficult social justice concepts around privilege, comfort zones, listening, authenticity, and responsibility, student staff can expand their own comfort zones leading to a stronger understanding of each other. This understanding, coupled with an intensive training of campus resources that support social justice, can lead to referrals, multiple introductions, and more connections between the incoming students, their families, and each other.

Having a solidly-prepared student staff committed to a social justice theme relieves some of the pressure to have one big program as the orientation participants now have access to difficult conversations through every workshop, small group conversation, and one-on-one interaction with student staff. The ability to have challenging conversations and an openness to being challenged can serve as the foundation for a new campus experience. During the first week on campus, a welcome week or even after classes have started, other student staff and campus professionals can offer informational, educational, and/or social programs to keep the conversations going through larger community building.

Conclusion

Though incorporating topics of social justice into orientation programs is undoubtedly challenging, we encourage doing something that is appropriate for your population, time constraints, skills, and budget. Whether you are using current students, faculty, staff, community members, or alumni or bringing in someone from the outside as a consultant, trainer, facilitator, or speaker, it is important to help incoming students and their families prepare for what is ahead and develop their sense of social responsibility.