

## Becoming a Champion of Orientation

Gregory V. Wolcott  
William J. Reckmeyer  
San Jose State University

Andrene Kaiwi Connor  
California Polytechnic State University

Rigoberto Flores  
San Jose State University

*Correspondence related to this article should be directed to Dr. Gregory V. Wolcott, Associate Vice President for Student Transition and Retention Services, San Jose State University, [gregory.wolcott@sjsu.edu](mailto:gregory.wolcott@sjsu.edu)*

### ABSTRACT

*New student orientation programs are one of the most important high impact practices for student success. These introductory programs not only empower students to be able to self-identify how their academic support needs can be met, they also provide the critically important introduction to building social support networks. College presidents must embrace the critical role of new student orientation programs, understand their complexities, and find ways to illustrate the role of these programs to faculty, staff, and students.*

Effective presidential leadership is vital to enabling the success of higher educational enterprises under the complex conditions they are likely to face for years to come. But college presidents must address a lot of competing leadership demands that collectively affect their ability to pursue strategic priorities, navigate a morphing variety of polarizing socio-political issues, please their boards of directors, and transform their institutions so students are better prepared for living and working in an increasingly global world. One of the most consistently pressing concerns expressed by many of these presidents in recent years has been the need to balance budgets in an era of declining revenues and increasing costs (Vasquez, 2020). Our focus in this chapter is to help college presidents understand the evolving importance of orientation programs in higher education, especially how those programs can strengthen the long-term financial and academic vitality of their institutions in the rough times ahead.

### Orientation: Strategic Importance

After more than 60 years of sustained expansion and development since the end of World War II, the strategic landscape of American higher education has been growing increasingly turbulent during the past decade. Flattening enrollments, intensifying financial pressures, changing expectations, free speech, immigration, social justice, digital technology, and globalization are among the most significant issues. These challenges, as well as other critical concerns, have been making the jobs of college presidents much more difficult than they were in previous eras. They

even led William H. McRaven, the departing chancellor of the University of Texas System and highly regarded former military commander who led the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, to observe that an academic presidency is the “toughest job in the nation” (Thomason, 2018). And that was before the Covid-19 pandemic turned the whole world upside down, which has already had devastating impacts on higher education and will likely do so for many years to come (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020).

Presidents should know that there are two significant trends that illuminate the important role college orientation programs can play in higher education. The first trend is economic. Critical features of this development are that the total number of students most likely to attend college is projected to decline precipitously in the coming decade, that increasing percentages of students are relying on subsidized student loans to pay for their studies, and that many of the state institutions (which enroll the vast majority of the postsecondary students in our country as a whole) will probably continue receiving less public financial support going forward. The second trend is academic. Critical features of this development are that the demographic composition of new students is much more diverse, that larger percentages of first-year students are inadequately prepared for college-level education, and that a growing number of all undergraduate students are taking longer to complete their studies.

The combined effects of these two trends, coupled with broadening skepticism about the value and price of college degrees, are severely compromising the financial viability of many postsecondary institutions and making it much more difficult for them to plan for the future. Faced with the prospect of diminishing revenues and escalating costs in an increasingly competitive strategic landscape, effective orientation programs can strengthen the ability of American colleges and universities to address both of the trends – economic and academic – that are driving their financial vulnerabilities. The primary goal of these programs is to provide new students with the essential information and initial support they need to successfully begin their undergraduate education.

When done well, these programs are a pivotal component of comprehensive strategic enrollment management efforts that can markedly improve the recruitment, retention, and graduation of students in a timely way. Much like the landscape of higher education as a whole, the purpose and scope of orientation programs has also drastically shifted since the first program was offered at Harvard University in the 1950s (Mack & Holl, 2019). By the 1980s these programs had become common practice throughout most of American higher education (Ward-Roof & Guthrie, 2010). Their general outcomes can be summarized as follows:

- Providing an overview of higher education and the university structure
- Clarifying academic and behavioral expectations in the college setting
- Integrating students into the academic life of the institution
- Integrating students into the social and co-curricular aspects of the institution
- Introducing resources (human and departmental) that can assist students during

their college experience

- Introducing parents and other family members to academic and behavioral expectations of the college environment and clarify their role in supporting their student

Most institutions offer orientation programs that address all of these outcomes in some form or fashion, but there are numerous ways to organize their efforts and some place greater weight on some factors than others depending on the type of institution, student demographics, and timing of the programs.

Large research-based institutions may emphasize academic expectations, for example, and the opportunities to engage in undergraduate research; mid-sized and smaller institutions may highlight the importance of a liberal education and career-based experiences; while private institutions may tout their reputations and publicize prominent alumni to illustrate the value of securing a degree from their college or university. No matter what the thematic emphasis, however, there is substantial commonality across different types of institutions in terms of their target audiences and who administers the orientation programs. A significant majority of institutions offer programs for first-year students (90%) and transfer students (70%), while less than half offer ones for other groups like international students and special students (Mack & Holl, 2019). Most of these programs are administered by Student Affairs (60%), with the balance evenly split between Enrollment Management and Academic Affairs (Mack & Holl, 2019).

### **Orientation: Enrollment Management**

Presidents should also know that orientation programming has evolved over the past several decades, expanding from informal stand-alone efforts into significant parts of comprehensive enrollment management efforts as higher ed institutions seek better ways to attract and retain students. This has led to a much greater focus on strategic outreach and recruitment. As recently as the 1980s, many colleges and universities approached their enrollment process with little regard for analytics and trends, relying instead on past practices and regional prominence to fill seats in the incoming class. With the evolution of national programs such as the GI Bill, Federal Student Aid, and various pathway programs, a “college going culture” emerged in primary and secondary school environments.

This led to an explosion in the number of college applications and ultimately to record enrollments – growing from nearly 6 million students in 1965 to slightly less than 20 million students in 2020, after cresting at more than 21 million students in 2010 (Statista, 2020). This phenomenon has forced institutions across the country to critically analyze the types of students they are recruiting to their institutions and proactively consider how they are setting themselves apart from their peer institutions. One of the most powerful ways they can do this is by strengthening their orientation programs, which are enabling institutions to communicate the distinctiveness of their offerings and convince applicants to choose them over many other options.

For most institutions, the outreach and recruitment process begins in early fall and culminates with an intent-to-enroll period that concludes in early May. Admission counselors typically “hit the road” to visit nearby high schools and community colleges, where they participate in college fairs and other outreach events. They share presentations and admissions brochures with the hopes of piquing the interest of potential first-year and transfer students to consider their institution during the application period. Contact information would be collected for additional follow-up communications to clarify admission requirements and connect students to areas of academic interest. Most institutions open their application period in September and close it around December 1st to recruit for the following fall semester. Generally, smaller recruitment efforts are made on a different timeline for the spring semester, which is generally shorter, but this varies according to institutional needs and student demographics. Some schools have open or rolling enrollment periods, which also affect the role and cycle of admissions recruitment and outreach.

Most institutions offer an event or series of programs leading up to the intent to enroll deadline (typically May 1st). These include speeches from the university president, college deans, and prominent alumni to congratulate students on their acceptance at the institution and outline the reasons they should ultimately commit to the institution. These can be considered miniature versions of orientation programs, but are distinct from the latter because they provide “just in time” information for students and families to inform their decision. After all, deciding to enroll at a particular institution often involves making a substantial financial as well as emotional commitment that will have long-lasting effects on their lives and careers.

It should be noted that many campuses have come to rely on technology to facilitate this work. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic underscored and amplified the growing importance of digital communication, institutions were learning that creating a savvy admissions website and databases to track students’ interest and admission activity helped further their enrollment goals. Private industry has gotten into the act with companies such as Oracle, Salesforce, Hobsons, and other firms working hand in hand with higher education to create technologies that manage the enrollment process. And with the advent of social media, any school worth its reputation will have accounts set up to regularly engage with prospective students and parents.

After the spring outreach events, which are also referred to as “yield” events because they help generate the commitment of the incoming class, there is usually a handoff from institutional outreach and recruitment professionals to their orientation team. Sometimes during or shortly after the yield process, critical information is shared with incoming students about orientation programs, including how to register and what will be discussed during orientation activities. In recent years, the lines have been blurred between what is considered a “yield event” and orientation. In fact, the role of orientation staff has expanded in recent years and they are now typically included in yield events and other communications to further entice new students into enrolling. In addition, as campuses have come to realize the vital role that orientation programming plays in the yield process, there has been pressure to expand the variety of programs, individuals, and initiatives in such efforts.

This has led some campuses to create pre-orientation websites and activities to distribute the growing amount of information they want to share with potential students and their parents.

Providing relevant communications or initiatives can help bridge the gap between what they receive from an institution prior to the intent-to-enroll deadline and what they need to know before their orientation session. This period can range from several days to several months, depending on the calendar of events and the size of the incoming class. For example, shortly after students commit to the institution, they often shift their attention to questions such as: What is it like to live on campus? Are there pre-tests I need to take this summer? Do I need to submit my final transcripts? When will my financial aid be confirmed?

Therefore, many institutions have created homegrown programs or worked with industry professionals to develop communications that share selected pre-orientation information with enrollees. Many campuses in the California State University System, for example, have partnered with companies like Advantage Design Group or Comevo to create flashy online pre-orientation materials that serve to reinforce students' interest in the institution while also informing them about orientation sessions. These campuses and other institutions were ahead of the curve when the pandemic hit because they were better positioned to provide and update timely online information to students and parents on an easily-accessible basis. Institutions that relied more heavily on older forms of communication were limited in their outreach. If nothing else, the current crisis has thrust campuses into the 21st century and made apparent how imperative it is for colleges and universities to maintain a robust online presence and programs to reach their various audiences.

### **Orientation: Essential Elements**

Determining what should be included in effective orientation programs is not as straight-forward as it used to be, when they focused almost exclusively on helping launch students on the path towards academic success. That made sense in the years prior to the exponential growth of higher education during the last half-century, but it is no longer sufficient in an era when students are more vocal about their interests and are more highly recruited than ever before. Colleges and universities are recognizing that they must design such programs to balance institutionally-defined and student-defined needs. If students aren't happy and enjoying their college experience, regardless of how well they are doing academically, many will either seek opportunities at other institutions that better fit their priorities or drop out of higher education altogether. Neither of those results are good news to the host institutions under any circumstances, but especially not to those that are facing significant financial troubles.

Presidents should know that effective orientation programs are more proactive and extensive than ever before, as institutions realize they can generate a much greater return on investment – economically and academically – than is likely to be achieved by recruiting additional students. The most successful programs include several principal features. One is that they begin the academic year with formal orientation sessions, ranging from a couple of days to a full week, that provide new students with the critical information, guidance, and tools they need to start managing their newly-independent lives on campus. A second is that they offer a variety of First Year Experiences that include specially-designed academic courses and closely-coordinated support services to help students get off to a good start (National Resource Center, 2020). A third is that they are jointly led by Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, so colleges and universities can provide an integrated introduction to the following major elements.

### *Academic Integration*

Integrating new students into the academic life and culture of their institutions remains the most important element of orientation programming today and warrants particular attention, primarily because students have been taking longer and longer to complete their undergraduate studies. Traditional first-year students coming from high school have been conditioned in ways that do not adequately prepare them for college life. Consider the typical schedule of a high school student. Up at 7:00 AM, school starts at 8:00 AM, 6-7 periods of back-to-back classes, followed by sports and activities at night, and a couple hours of homework to follow. The life of a college-bound high school student is even more demanding and an absolute grind, not to mention any extra tutoring or test preparation courses they are taking to get an edge when it comes to college applications – or the constant social media exchanges and internet surfing, of course, which pervade everything that modern teenagers do.

The academic life of most college students is much more flexible and filled with far fewer required time-defined commitments than they've ever experienced in school before – usually no more than a couple of classes each day (at the most) and on a staggered schedule. Most classes only meet once or twice a week and relatively few meet daily like in the secondary school model. Studying can be done at home, in the library, or at the coffee shop – and rarely are there routine homework assignments to keep students on track. However, the demands of college life are far more stringent and instructor expectations much higher than most students experience in high school. Given the dramatic increase in free time that most students have in all aspects of their lives during college, effective orientation programs should devote a significant amount of attention and time discussing academic responsibilities and opportunities. The most innovative ones include three major academic components.

First, exemplary programs provide new students with a substantial introduction to a broad mix of academic expectations at formal orientation sessions shortly before the school year begins. They recognize that incoming students do not really understand much about how their college or university is organized, the variety of educational opportunities that are available to them, and what is necessary for them to succeed. The really good programs provide students with a comprehensive overview of different academic units and formal requirements so students can see the big picture – general education, different majors, and other important graduation requirements. They also address less formal factors that are vital to academic success. These can range from information about basic operational matters (like how to choose and schedule classes or the nature of course syllabi as contracts between professors and students) to guidance about other factors (like recommendations on how and how much to study or faculty assumptions about attendance and appropriate classroom behavior).

Second, exemplary programs provide new students at their formal orientation sessions with a hands-on introduction to an online portal that allows them to proactively manage their personal academic success. The best portals include a fully-integrated set of interactive digital tools that enable students to undertake several related activities. One important set of tools are those that help students plan their path to graduation – including the ability to identify the requirements for general education and their chosen majors, design a roadmap for how to satisfy those

requirements in a timely way, track their progress towards meeting those requirements, and modify their roadmap if they choose to do so. Another set of tools are those that help students address the practical aspects of campus life – including the ability to schedule classes in a specific semester, structure their time commitments, and manage their finances. Other sets of tools are those that provide links and contact information for relevant campus resources to help students during their academic journey – including the ability to easily communicate with departmental and general education advisors, access tutoring services, and request mentoring support.

Third, exemplary programs provide new students with additional orientation experiences during their initial year on campus that are specifically designed to help them successfully transition from high school to college. The most ambitious programs offer First Year Experiences that are full academic courses taught by faculty members, required for all entering students, and a variety of related support activities led by upperclass students who have received training from student affairs professionals. The focus of the academic courses varies from institution to institution. Some campuses adopt a particular theme for the year and have every FYE spend a semester addressing that theme, while other campuses allow faculty members to choose different topics but teach them in a similar way that targets new students. One way to strengthen FYEs would be to offer academic courses that consciously promote a more integrative appreciation of human knowledge in toto (Reckmeyer, 1990) by fleshing out the overview of academic fields provided during the initial orientation sessions and drawing on multiple disciplinary perspectives to address different substantive topics.

### *Social Integration*

Studies show that social integration into the university is equally important to academic integration. For example, Tinto (1993; 1975) evaluated the importance of social integration for preventing suicide. As human beings, we need interaction and reinforcement from others to lead a healthy, fulfilling life. This could not be more true when it comes to incoming freshmen who are facing a multitude of emotions when they enter college. They are anxious, excited, confused, homesick, adventurous, and wide-eyed about their new world. Experiencing the transition alone can be daunting, even defeating, with the result that some students do not survive it. Evidence shows that the first 4-6 weeks are significant and the key to successfully making the transition is due in large part to how socially integrated they become in the university.

Orientation can play a major role in facilitating this social integration process. Many programs separate large groups of students into smaller groups, led by a peer mentor or orientation leader to help break the ice and make students more comfortable. Most new students enter these activities begrudgingly, but ultimately report that it was the best part of orientation. This can be likened to a church service when the pastor asks everyone to stand and shake hands (or bump elbows, in 2020) and share a word or two. Some people dread this, but it usually gives them energy and helps prepare them for the sermon. People benefit from meeting others and learning that they have things in common and have come together for a shared purpose. This is not at all unlike getting college freshmen to interact with each other during orientation. It helps create a sense that others are experiencing the same emotions and concerns that they are all going to survive it together.

Other ways to socially integrate students into the life of an institution are to introduce opportunities for becoming involved in clubs and organizations. This is not unfamiliar territory since many new students may have been involved in similar types of activities when they were in high school. Typical examples include participation in associated student body programs; service on link crews; and membership in clubs promoting culture, arts, dance, music, and more. The benefits are nearly universally understood and promote a sense of belonging (Astin, 1985). These types of activities, as well as part-time jobs on campus, provide “experiential labs” where students can try out new skills and learn new things. They also help new students expand their network of friends and colleagues.

### *Institutional Affiliation*

Helping new students develop a personal affiliation with the campus is not only a prominent part of orientation programming, it has become an important contributor to the enrollment and yield process. If you don’t believe me, ask yourself this: Do you know what a Tar Heel or a Buckeye is? How about a Spartan or a Mustang? You may not know what these terms mean, but you probably recognize they are associated with different colleges and universities around the country. Orientation programming is generally good at introducing students to institutional traditions like mascots, athletics, fight songs, and alma mater hymns. There is an altruistic goal achieved by introducing traditions like these, because they help new students feel they are personally part of a larger community. For many people, their collegiate affiliations last a lifetime and are often more meaningful than what they studied.

However, helping new students develop an affiliation with their campus has also become critical to institutional bottom lines. Now more than ever, high school students are completing multiple applications and getting accepted by more than one institution. The shopping begins in the spring and summer of their senior year. Where they apply increasingly reflects a variety of factors besides institutional prestige and admission criteria. Many of today’s students are also influenced by what different campuses offer in terms of financial packages, choices of majors and academic services, residential accommodations, recreational facilities, and other less tangible features. Faculty, staff, and administrators need to remember that promoting institutional affiliation should be a core part of a nuanced approach to orientation. In addition to all of the practical advice and information they provide, a well-orchestrated orientation program recognizes that making students feel comfortable with their institution can often be the ultimate factor in whether they decide to enroll or not.

### *Campus Resources*

Orientation programs should also introduce participants to the structure of their institutions and how to access the different resources that are available to new students. Colleges and universities are complex, multi-layered enterprises. Understanding how to successfully navigate them can be very intimidating, even for long-time employees, but especially for students who are on their own – usually for the first time in their lives – and unfamiliar with how higher education works. Presidents should encourage wide participation by relevant faculty, staff, and administrators



throughout the orientation process, even though much of these activities are often led by Student Affairs and usually occur outside normal semester schedules. This enables students to not only learn about their various roles on campus, but also to meet a broad cross-section of the people who are responsible for providing the resources that are fundamental to their short-term as well as long term success.

Faculty and staff are the primary mentors and coaches who will guide students during their years on campus, but using them appropriately as resources involves more than simply knowing about them. Orientation personnel need to share their knowledge in ways that don't just inform students about what kinds of services and opportunities are available, but welcome and encourage them to proactively access those resources whenever they wish to do so. As such, colleges and universities would be well-advised to feature some of their premier and most student-centered faculty and staff during a mix of formal and informal activities during orientation. Potential examples include inviting recipients of campus honors to serve as featured speakers, introducing students to selected department chairs, organizing group sessions so students can meet with general education and faculty advisors, and hosting receptions for parents with college deans and other senior administrators.

There are multiple ways that orientation directors can incorporate institutional resources into their programs. One common approach is to offer a campus resource fair where departments are invited to staff a table and share brochures, business cards, and promotional items. A version of this approach that has become popular in 2020 is the virtual resource fair, where campus departments are placed into digital breakout rooms and students can choose the rooms they wish to visit. Another approach is to summarize the campus resources in a comprehensive format, such as an orientation or new student guide or booklet. These are useful tools that entering students can use throughout their first year, although the downside is that they can be costly and become outdated soon after printing. An alternative approach is to offer these brochures in an interactive online format, either on a campus website or through an orientation module on Canvas or Blackboard. Either option can be easily updated as information changes leading up to the start of the fall semester or between semesters.

### **Pre-Matriculation and Bridge Programs**

One offshoot of orientation programming that has emerged is the creation of pre-matriculation and bridge programs. These programs are designed to specifically meet the needs of emerging populations in higher education including first generation students, students of color, low income students, undocumented students, veterans, and more. These programs began the realm of educational opportunity programs which started in the 1960s and have now expanded to include other populations. The aims of these programs are often to help students get a head start on their academic preparation, introduce resources, and connect them to one another to form community. Although typically these programs are offered separately from orientation, they can be an effective tool for welcoming and retaining incoming students and helping them to feel part of the community.

## **Importance of Orientation Leaders**

College presidents should know that one of the most transformational additions to orientation programs has been formalized systems that engage current students to support the transition of incoming students. These formalized groups, now commonly referred to as Orientation Leaders (OLs), have become high level leaders with a great deal of responsibility and leadership training that support the co-curricular and academic transition incoming students experience. OLs have become integral parts of orientation programs because they serve as university ambassadors that can speak to university culture and foster a supportive, welcoming and inclusive environment for incoming students.

Institutions utilize OLs in a variety of ways and the team structures may vary depending on the need, size, model and/or goal of an orientation program. Whether they are volunteers or paid student employees, are part of large or small teams, or work at a private, public or community college, OLs participate in extensive selection processes and training to prepare them for their roles to welcome incoming students. Selection processes consist of various steps including but not limited to an online application, a group interview, individual interviews and reference checks. Each step challenges OL applicants to think about the importance of orientation programs and why the OL role is critical to welcome and retain new students.

Unfortunately, some mandatory orientation program components are transactional - including but not limited to FERPA presentations, financial aid workshops, or course registration - and may be less engaging due to the nature of the content. By including OLs in these orientation program components, the campus can ensure these components are more relatable and familiar, going from transactional to transformational experiences.

If energy and time is invested in properly training OLs, they are capable of answering general questions, leading small group breakout sessions, and sharing their personal experiences. One example where this is evident is teaching new students how to register for classes. OLs have experience registering for classes and understand how to navigate the various tools to search and sign up for courses. Receiving help from a current student that is taking courses, can speak to schedule times and classes, and understands what it means to be a student is received more positively than from an academic advisor who is familiar with the policies but might not have as much context.

Orientation programs should not be a “to-do” item that incoming students are required to attend and check off their list. Orientation programs should be transformative and seen as a tool to leverage retention and enrollment from admission to graduation. OLs serve a critical role in supporting student retention efforts because they follow up with their small group of students routinely to check-in and answer any immediate questions. The rapport that is established at orientation programs make these interactions more organic and help incoming students feel a sense of belonging and support. College is a very exciting but scary time and using OLs to alleviate some of the concerns can positively shape a new student’s perspective on the institution and their decision to attend.

## Fall Programs: Weeks of Welcome

We have identified that critical elements to developing a comprehensive orientation, transition and retention program includes helping students to succeed academically, assisting students in their adjustment to the involvement with the institution, helping families understand the complexity, demands and service of the collegiate environment, and providing the institution an opportunity to learn more about incoming students through formal and informal means. A continuous orientation program, such as a welcome week model, allows for the university to guide a new student through their transition process into their first year rather than relying upon the traditional orientation to cover all of the elements during a one, two or maybe three-day experience. The welcome week format will allow for the entire campus community to collaborate in onboarding the new student and their family to the institution. This section highlights key features of a welcome week orientation format, the role of the staff (professional and students) and importance of campus-wide collaboration. Welcome week programs can provide a series of events that are used to expand on traditional summer orientation content while connecting students to their new community. These programs typically take place prior to the fall term and extend content beyond the traditional orientation program in order to deliver additional relevant content. Some institutions continue into the first week of classes and other institutions program events into several weeks. Coordinating the schedule with the institution's residence life/housing and campus dining program partners is key to designing the schedule for a welcome week program. Aligning the timing of move-in with orientation is economically beneficial. The additional costs associated with traveling to the campus and returning home in the middle of summer, only to return again for fall move-in can take its toll and is something to consider on behalf of new students and their family. Partnering with such resources can lead to additional program offerings during the week and could also assist with expenses.

The welcome week model can assist new students as they adjust to the campus community and their new environment through academic and student development programs. Discovering a new environment and community is transformational. Students who participate in welcome week gain a connection with other new students, current students, their college or departments, faculty, campus resources and services, and the surrounding local community. Students are seeking to fit into the social environment and learn more about their new institution. During a traditional orientation, a new student may begin to feel accepted and start to make connections, but it can be strengthened through experiences beyond orientation; in a program such as a welcome week format.

When considering the vision of a welcome week program, key factors to should include, but are not limited to:

- Facilitating successful academic and social transition opportunities;
- Introducing students to values and expectations of the institution;
- Fostering a sense of belonging to the campus community and building affinity space

- Engaging the entire campus community in reaching out to new students

Welcome week is typically a series of activities designed to introduce new students to campus life, academic preparedness and building relationships. It instills a sense of ownership with the college experience, encourages identity and affinity, fosters institutional pride, and acknowledges a responsibility to the community they will call home for 2,4,5 years. The following is a list of common components of a welcome week format:

- Early move-in to living community on or off campus
- Convocation/Induction
- Common book reading/discussion/guest lecture
- Academic integrity, expectations, preparedness
- Outreach with faculty and staff
- Navigating campus through tours, resources fairs and open office hours
- Health and well-being through presentations about bystander intervention, Title IX, personal safety, alcohol and other drugs, diversity and inclusion, relationships
- Social events and activities: small and large scale programs, concerts, recreational activities, athletic events;
- Introduction and recruitment opportunities for campus clubs and organizations
- Community relations and activities: learn the local bus and other alternative transportation systems, visit the local community downtown, interact with neighbors; community service projects introduce students to recreation activities in the local area. (NODA Orientation Planning Manual; Kaiwi,Mockford 2014)

### **Welcome Week Staff**

The direction and coordination of the welcome week staff is most often located under the division of student affairs and may be assigned under several different units of an institution. The specific point of contact, or coordinator of the welcome week program is often the director or assistant director of an OTR or first year experience area at the institution. The area may be a stand alone office, a unit within a dean of students format, or located within a housing department. Regardless of the reporting structure, the orientation, transition, retention, or OTR, a professional's role does not waiver. The responsibility of OTR professional developing and directing a welcome week model will ensure that the new student has a successful transition and recognizes that their transition experience is not confined to the traditional summer orientation model. Their role is to maintain a high level, broad perspective of the vision (the big picture) of bringing the broader campus community together to support a holistic and student-centered

transition. To support the efforts of the OTR professional, they often have a team that can include administrative support, graduate students and paid or volunteer student leaders (including orientation leaders or residential/community advisors). As previously mentioned, incorporating student leaders provides various benefits to the new student experience. The peer to peer model during a welcome week format further enhances the new students transition re-enforcing building connections and finding community.

### **Campus-wide collaboration**

The primary role of the OTR professionals within the institution is to provide a seamless and holistic transition to the campus, but they do not have the capacity nor expertise to conduct this process without support. A big function of their role is to collaborate with other departments on campus who support students in their transition and success. It is important for OTR professionals to do this with intention. They tend to serve as the gatekeeper of the new student experience. Identifying potential collaborators is a key function of the OTR professional. (Higginbotham, Mastrogiovanni, 2019. pg. 127). Designing and executing a welcome week program is multi-faceted and is an extremely large undertaking that requires support from the entire campus. Fostering strategic partnerships is a critical component of welcome week planning. A common strategy for building campus partnerships is to form a welcome week steering committee or a program planning committee.

A steering committee would be instrumental in providing input on program objectives, knowledge of the institutional initiatives, and ability to make high level decisions regarding timing, scheduling, budgeting and content will be invaluable to the planning process. Committee members might include residential life, campus police, dining, academic advising, facilities, student leadership, and facilities. With larger programs, a program planning committee would be ideal. A planning committee may each focus on smaller aspects of the planning process, dividing tasks and projects into manageable groups. Common considerations for planning committee members include: student affairs staff, faculty, campus resource centers, and student leadership.

The welcome week model provides an institution the ability to create an intentional and relevant program that provides pathways and methods to share information with students that is timely, practical and inspiring. The extended orientation model of a welcome week format helps students to build affinity for their institution, while also potentially building confidence in their transition. The extended time of making connections and building relationships with the campus community will lead to higher rates of resiliency and increased sense of belonging, ultimately increasing student satisfaction and retention.

### **Conclusion**

The changing role of the college president requires identification of several factors and initiatives that will lead the university into the next chapter of higher education. Although demand is high for external relations, alumni engagement, fundraising, and other programs, the college president would serve the university well by not only supporting orientation programming, but becoming a champion. Orientation can help the university meet its goal around recruitment and retention, but

also establish a baseline to address the emerging economic and academic trends in higher education.

### References

- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297-308.
- Chronicle of Higher Education. (2020) *The Post-Pandemic College* .
- Higginbotham, E., IV, & Mastrogiovanni, J. (2019) Leveraging extended orientation programming to enhance the student transition experience. In M. Payne and M. Sedotti (eds.), *Building successful foundations: Best practices in orientation, transition, and retention* (p. 120-130). Minneapolis: NODA – Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention.
- Kaiwi, A., & Mockford, J. (2014) Welcome week programs. In J. A. Ward-Roof and J. M. Mastrogiovanni (eds.), *Orientation planning manual* (p.58-65). Minneapolis: NODA – Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention.
- Mack, C. E., & Holl, J. (2019) Introduction to the orientation, transition, and retention profession. In J. A. Ward-Roof and J. M. Mastrogiovanni (eds.), *Building successful foundations: Best practices in orientation, transition, and retention* (p. 10-22). Minneapolis: NODA – Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention.
- National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. (n.d.) University of South Carolina. Retrieved October 15, 2020 from [https://sc.edu/about/offices\\_and\\_divisions/national\\_resource\\_center/research/index.php](https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/national_resource_center/research/index.php)
- Reckmeyer, W. J. (1990) Paradigms and progress: Integrating knowledge and education for the twenty-first century. In M. E. Clark and S. A. Wawytko (eds.), *Rethinking the Curriculum: Toward an Integrated, Interdisciplinary College Education* (pp. 53-64). Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Snyder, T. D. (1993) *120 Years of American education: A statistical portrait*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183995/us-college-enrollment-and-projectionsin-public-and-private-institutions/>
- Thomason, A. (2018). *Is college president “the toughest job in the nation?”* *Chronicle of Higher Education*. [https://www.chronicle.com/article/is-college-president-the-toughest-job-in-the-nation?cid2=gen\\_login\\_refresh&cid=gen\\_sign\\_in](https://www.chronicle.com/article/is-college-president-the-toughest-job-in-the-nation?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in)
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2<sup>nd</sup>. ed). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Vasquez, M. (2020). As the pandemic grinds on, here are 5 big worries of college presidents.  
*Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Ward-Roof, Jeanine A. and Guthrie, Kathy L. (2010) Reflections on the history and future of orientation, transition, and retention programs. In J. A. Ward-Roof (ed.), *Designing successful transitions: A guide for orienting students to college* (Monograph No. 13, 3rd ed., pp. 229-238). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.