

Re-Orienting Orientation for On-Campus Students: The ‘Nuts & Bolts’ in the Faculty of Business at the University of Southern Queensland

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Abstract

In late 2005 the Faculty of Business at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) established the position of Coordinator, Student and Corporate Engagement. Shortly thereafter, USQ established the position of Dean of Students. The incumbents of both positions were responsible, among other things, for Orientation, the Coordinator for the Faculty and the Dean for the whole University. This ‘Nuts & Bolts’ session is an opportunity to share the USQ experience of re-orienting Orientation for on-campus students, shifting the focus from orientation-as-event to orientation-as-event + process using the Faculty of Business as a case study. The session will garner ideas and experiences of participants and contribute to the body of practical knowledge about what works best in relation to on-campus Orientation.

Background

Orientation has become an important part of the first year experience at the University of Southern Queensland. However, until 2006 with the establishment of a University Orientation Committee there was little coordination or integration of orientation activities by Faculties and support sections. Until then Orientation was essentially a series of O-week events focused mainly on information-rich, academically oriented sessions in the class room environment without much emphasis on social processes.

The Committee was originally chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor and then the Dean of Students. Its work was given significant directions by a report on transition and retention issues submitted to the Learning and Teaching Committee in early 2006 (Taylor, *et al*, 2006). This report provided detailed recommendations on a range of transition and retention issues, including enhancing the first year experience. The Committee had already received brief discussion papers on both on-campus and external orientation issues (Taylor, 2005a, 2005b). The gist of these papers was that Orientation was:

- uncoordinated across the University;
- not valued by staff or students;
- focused on administrative rather than academic orientation; and
- resulted in information overload for students.

It was recommended that Orientation should focus on *both* social and academic well-being of students and that the orientation process should be spread over at least the first five weeks and at most the first semester of study.

Re-Orientation of Orientation

In early 2006 the University created a new senior management position, the Dean of Students. The Dean was given overall responsibility for improving the quality of the student experience with, among other things, specific responsibility for Orientation actioned primarily via the Orientation Committee. The Committee, armed with the Taylor report and Krause, *et al* (2005), determined that the 2007 Orientation would be better coordinated and integrated and that the focus would shift from orientation-as-event(s) to orientation-as-event(s) + process. It was agreed that much of the administrative and academic detail would be delivered on a just-in-time basis rather than as an information ‘dump’ during O-week. This made room in O-week for social activities. For the first time ever the week was to commence on the Sunday with a ‘Welcome BBQ’ to which students and their supporters (families) were invited. This barbecue was social in intent, but relevant staff were on hand to field enquiries from students and members of their families. This was to lead into Faculty-based activities commencing on the Monday morning and running through until the Wednesday.

The Faculty of Business established a 0.6 fractional position of Coordinator, Student and Corporate Engagement in late 2005. The Coordinator worked closely with the Dean of Students and Orientation Committee to develop an orientation process for on-campus students at the Toowoomba Campus. Commencing on the Monday morning of O-week the Faculty focused on social aspects by creating opportunities to build relationships between students and between students and staff. Social events (breakfast and coffee, live music and fun activities) were organised. These were interspersed with short sessions focused on academic issues of immediate importance (such as understanding the learning management system). The Faculty program was coordinated with other Faculty and support section programs so that clashes were avoided for combined degree students and so that business students could attend whole-of-University events organised by the Student Guild.

Where feasible students were enrolled in the same set of courses in their first semester and, in these courses, lecturers agreed to set aside some time for support staff to present to students. It was anticipated that, for example, presenting students with information on how to write an assignment close to the time when students were actually writing the assignment would be more beneficial to the students than trying to cram study skills into O-week as some kind of event. To complement the academic support, a social program was created that ran a few weeks into the semester. In addition, a Business Students’ Club was established to provide social and other activities on an ongoing basis.

Reflections

The Faculty of Business surveyed students during week three of the semester in 2007. About 48 percent of first year students had attended O-week. Overall, they appreciated the social activities (and considered that more ‘fun’ activities would be improved their experience). They felt that some of the academic activities were boring or repetitive. Academic staff were generally positive about the changes.

As a result of experience during 2007, the O-week program for 2008 was changed and a very strong focus was brought to bear on social activities. These activities were focused on BizQuiz, a team game designed both to be fun and to orient students to life as a student in the

Faculty of Business. The free breakfasts were repeated, with more interaction between staff, existing students and new students. The role of the Business Students Club was consolidated.

Nuts & Bolts

In this session the presenters will share their learning from 2006 and 2007. These will be based on student surveys and data on student academic outcomes. The presenters will invite comparisons between their approach and those of other institutions. It is anticipated that the sharing of experiences will contribute to improvements in orientation at USQ and other institutions in the future.

References

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Professor Rod St Hill is Dean of Students at the University of Southern Queensland. He has previously held a number of senior positions at the University, including Dean of Business. In recent years he has published in the area of learning styles and multiple representations. He is interested in the student learning journey as a framework for thinking about issues associated with orientation, transition and first year experience.