

Speed Dating and Lollipops: the development of an Orientation Program, by Continuing and Graduating Students and its Unintended Consequences.

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This session outlines and discusses the development of an innovative orientation program, developed by selected continuing and graduating students at the Faculty of Business and Law, University of Newcastle, for commencing students in 2008. The primary objective of the program was to provide an interactive orientation experience, utilizing the creative talents of existing students from the faculty. Twenty-five student leaders undertook to develop specific activities for commencing students that were program and course specific. An unintended consequence of the program was the extent to which early social relationships emerged between commencing students as an outcome of these shared experiences. A discussion of the program, its development and preliminary evaluation, provides an opportunity for critically evaluating the extent to which we seek to create increasingly sophisticated informational orientation experiences for commencing students and whether all we really need to do is to provide “Speed Dating and Lollipops”.

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Background

Improving the first year experience (FYE) of Australian university learners has been part of a set of initiatives to respond to concerns about undergraduate education overall. One of these concerns relates to issues of student retention in courses and programs, as many Australian institutions are experiencing declines in both course load and program retention among undergraduates. Reduction of course load from full-time study patterns to part-time study patterns and progression of undergraduates past their first year of study has both financial and academic implications for universities in Australia. Much of this reduction and attrition appears to occur in the first year of undergraduate studies and more specifically in the first semester of studies undertaken. In an effort to mitigate first-year course load reduction and program attrition, many universities undertake university, faculty and/ or program orientation activities aimed at introducing commencing students to university experiences and processes, thereby attempting to reduce anxiety and provide as much information as possible to commencing students. These activities often utilize continuing students in an effort to engage commencing students with peers, as peer friendships can act as a support network and help with initial transition to university (Gass, Garvey and Sugerman, 2003).

In addition to peer involvement, involvement of former students is also seen as a key ingredient for the success of first year orientation programs (Johnson and McFadden 2000). Therefore, the University of Newcastle, Faculty of Business and Law, undertook to facilitate

the creation of a unique orientation program, called UniStart 08 – to be developed and implemented by Student Leaders selected from faculty continuing students and graduating students. Care was taken to ensure that as many equity groups as possible were represented within the Student Leader team.

Student Leaders

Twenty-five Student Leaders undertook training about the issues confronting the faculty and university related to load reduction and attrition, in early October 2007. The group broke into two focus groups, where discussion ensued about issues confronting commencing undergraduates and FYE in general. Results of the focus groups were combined, and a brain storming exercise was undertaken resulting in the formation of six working teams to create, develop and formulate materials for six UniQuests. It was determined that all Faculty Business and Law commencing students would undertake each of the UniQuests within a large group of peers (30 students) in a range of activities and experiences that allowed them to remain with their peers throughout a whole day and beyond into other planned activities to occur after commencement. It was also determined that groups of commencing students be formed around program of enrolment so that student leaders could customize orientation activities according to common courses in which commencing students would be enrolled.

UniQuests

Each ‘UniQuest’ was created by a team of 3-4 Student Leaders, with critical input from the other Student Leaders and me, via BBd forums and face-to-face meetings including presentations. A condition of each ‘UniQuest’ created, was that it have an interactive element built in. In most instances, this consisted of a quiz or other competitive activity. Prizes were awarded for first, second and third in each ‘Uniquest’. The process of ‘UniQuest’ creation was conducted from October 2007 to January 2008.

Final materials produced included (1) a student booklet, (2) instructions for Student Leaders and (3) a BBd site for commencing students used in completion of one of the ‘UniQuests’.

The six ‘UniQuests’ were,

- (1) Speed Dating –a whistle was blown every two minutes; students were provided with example questions and moved around the group.
- (2) Lift – Off – (*conducted in tutorial rooms*) overview of course outlines, lectures, tutorials, timetable tips, time management, exams overview, overview of note taking methods. – A multi choice quiz was conducted.
- (3) 2nd Life – (*conducted in computer labs*) commencing students logged into the “2nd Life” Blackboard site created for the purpose; went through the menu, looking at example lecture notes, Ppt slides, course outline, discussion forums, important University websites, students submitted an example assignment into TURNITIN and completed a quiz.
- (4) Student HUBS & Information Common - students completed an assignment cover sheet and submitted a ‘dummy’ assignment, collected transport concession forms and proceeded to Information Common where they sat at computers and learnt about “Printcopy” and photocopy cards/credit. Proceeded upstairs through Library and downstairs to courtyard – quiz conducted throughout.
- (5) “100’s & 1000’s” – (*conducted by walking tour*) students toured bus stops, Union, food outlets, Bookshop, learnt about Sporting facilities and opportunities, Forum.

(6) “Hunter Hideout” – (*conducted by walking tour*) students walked to Hunter HUB, viewed Careers, Medical Centre, Hunter Building, Counseling Service, Food Outlets, Library, concluding with drink at BAR on HILL.

Evaluation

- Over 350 commencing student attendees.
- 95-100% commencing student attendance until conclusion at 3:30pm.
- Survey - Most popular “UniQuests” were ‘Speed Dating’ and ‘2nd Life’.
- Survey - Student Leaders and commencing students stated that the best part of the program was being able to form early friendships with students in same Programs and courses – ‘Relationships’ were indicated in FBL 07 FYE research as the “best aspect of uni”.

Areas for Discussion

1. Is knowledge about university experiences and processes, the primary driver of many orientation activities at universities in Australia?
2. What evidence is there that this knowledge reduces commencing student course-load reduction and program attrition?
3. Are experiences and emotions more important than information (knowledge)?
4. How can we create more socially engaging and emotional early university experiences for commencing students?

References

Gass, M., Garvey, D. and Sugarman, D. 2003, ‘The Long term Effects of a First Year Student Orientation Program’, *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 26, 1, p. 34-40.

Johnson, Alex B. and McFadden Gloria, ‘The Value of Multi-Dimensional Retention Programs for First time Students at Community Colleges’, *The International Conference on Teaching and Leadership Excellence of the National Institute of Staff and Organizational Development*, Austin Texas, May 2000.