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*This chapter examines the design and execution of parent orientation programs that meet the needs and expectations of today's diverse families.*

## More Than Punch and Cookies: A New Look at Parent Orientation Programs

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Kwang and his parents, grandparents, twin sisters, and aunt spent the last twenty-four hours en route from Seoul, Korea. Until today their only visits to an American campus have been virtual tours on the Web.

Jason and his family already know the campus well. His parents divorced five years ago, but they have come together for this long awaited day. They have high expectations for their alma mater and their only child. Both physicians, they hope to discuss the new pre-med curriculum with Jason's adviser.

Lilly and her mother drove five hundred miles together, listening to their favorite music and talking most of the way. They have spent the last ten years as a team, companions as well as mother and daughter. When she returns home, Lilly's mother will live alone for the first time in her life. Both she and Lilly wonder what it will be like for them to live apart.

Samantha, her mother, and her mother's female partner arrive early in the morning; her father, stepmother, and baby brother appear in her residence hall room later in the day. Samantha's parents do not usually speak to each other. They have both been through this twice before with Samantha's siblings, and they want things to go more smoothly this time.

### **Changing Needs and Expectations**

A stroll around almost any campus on the day orientation begins will reveal an extraordinary variety of family constellations, as reflected in the preceding descriptions. Indeed, the challenge of providing an inclusive and effective

orientation program for students and their families is never more apparent than on those emotionally laden *disorienting* days when new students and their parents arrive, full of anxiety, excitement, and expectation.

In order to meet the multiple needs and expectations of today's diverse families, colleges and universities must regularly reexamine the purpose, scope, and structure of the orientation programs they provide to parents of first-year students. Designing an effective parent orientation program is hardly a "one size fits all" proposition. No single formula exists. American institutions of higher education represent the most varied in the world—differing in size, mission, and organizational culture. This chapter explores parent orientation needs on today's campus and includes a variety of examples from institutions that have developed effective programs that complement their institutional missions. The term *parent orientation* will be used predominantly throughout the chapter, although we recognize that many institutions choose to define their target audience as *parents and siblings*, *parents and guardians*, or *families*.

## **An Overview of Parent Orientation Today**

Mindful of the importance of the first-year transition, almost all colleges and universities offer orientation programs for parents of new college students. The programs at most institutions today differ significantly from the generic punch-and-cookies receptions of generations past, where it was common for a dean or president to welcome weary parents and then send them summarily on their way. Parents gained little insight into their son's or daughter's new life; nor was anyone likely to mention that this was a transition for parents, too.

In many colleges and universities, the days of *in loco parentis* are over. As colleges and universities have redefined their relationship with parents over the last few decades, and as the student population and family compositions have grown more diverse, orientation programs for families have grown in sophistication as well as in number.

Although some programs last only a few hours, others consume several days. Some programs take place during the summer; others are held at the opening of the academic year. Most aim to reassure parents, make them feel comfortable, and give them a realistic view of today's college experience—a view that belies the idyllic perfection of the admissions viewbooks.

Standard components of a parent orientation include introductions of key players in the administration and information on resources available to students. Programs also communicate information about specific needs—from banking arrangements for internationals to counseling support groups for children of alcoholics. Directly or indirectly, the college or university sends messages about the role of parents in this new relationship. Many schools also incorporate a ceremonial component, a university tradition or

ritual, that formalizes the transition students and parents experience and promotes a sense of connection to the institution.

**Components of Effective Parent Orientation Programs.** Although packaged in different ways to reflect institutional identity, parent orientation programs should acknowledge the impact of the first-year transition on parents and other family members and give parents an inside view of the academic, social, and psychological transitions that first-year students experience; provide parents information and tools to support their student's success; set expectations and define the relationship between parents and the institution; and promote parents' sense of connection to the institution. The following sections will consider each of these components.

*Acknowledging and Supporting the Family Transition.* Most universities recognize that a young person's departure for college is a rite of passage for families—whether the child is the first, last, or only. When they arrive on campus, both students and their families know that things will never be quite the same again. An effective parent orientation program fosters separation while helping parents learn how to support their child's growing independence and success in college appropriately.

Many schools design transition programs that acknowledge the separation process and provide information and reassurance to families. They validate the ambivalent feelings of joy and sadness, excitement and fear, or anxiety and relief that families are likely to feel as they embark on the college journey. These programs also can give parents insight into today's college, as well as provide tools to deal with the predictable pleasure and pain of the first-year experience.

Washington University in St. Louis has offered “Letting Go” programs for parents since the early 1980s. Though much of the content has changed over the years, the format and its emotional underpinnings remain the same. On the morning after move-in day, while the new students take placement tests, parents file into the performing arts center—some with grandparents on their arms, others with sleepy, younger siblings in tow. The air is filled with animated conversation and nervous laughter as perfect strangers inquire about each other's children and trade stories about their trips to campus or the stresses of move-in day.

A senior-level administrator hosts the program and welcomes the parents. After a brief presentation about the likely changes college students will experience and the important role that parents will continue to play, the speaker introduces two upper-class students who assume the role of first-year students. With telephones in hand, the students perform a skit in which they each make three phone calls home over the course of the first semester—one soon after orientation, one at midterms, and one during finals. There is no script for this skit, but the student actors always provide parents with an unforgettable view of college life today and the dynamic characteristics of first semester.

Including students in this presentation provides authenticity to the session. Their skit invariably evokes laughter and tears as parents recognize parent-child interchanges that are all too familiar. Written evaluations as well as anecdotal conversations indicate that parents carry the message from this presentation with them. It is not unusual for parents to refer to this program many weeks later when they return for Parents Weekend—and even four years later at graduation, sharing stories of their own student's phone calls and scenarios reminiscent of those in the skit.

After the skit, the student actors answer questions and offer advice to the parents. Their specific messages vary, but they always include something about how much college students need their parents to serve as an anchor for them. They urge parents to trust their children and respect their growing independence and to support the changes they will experience. The students acknowledge that this is a tricky balance for parents to negotiate, and as one student told the parent group, "Sometimes we want your advice and sometimes we don't. We just won't tell you which time is which." The administrator concludes the session with specific suggestions about how to parent as a coach or mentor, rather than a rescuer, and encourages parents to get to know the resources of the university (Coburn and Treeger, 1997).

At some schools, members of the counseling center lead the transition program. For example, at Appalachian State University, in a session titled "Changing Roles," two counselors describe the transitions facing college students and their families and offer ways for parents to help their son or daughter cope effectively with the new college environment (Appalachian State University Orientation Office, 1999). This approach provides parents with pragmatic tools and a psychological context through which to understand their student's and their own experience.

Other schools host panel discussions with parents of upper-class students who share their experiences and insights. In this format, topics unlikely to be raised by the administration often are discussed. These may include strategies for dealing with issues from cohabitation difficulties to avoiding the long wait at the health center. Most parents of first-year students appreciate the candor and the bonding that occurs.

East Stroudsburg University in Pennsylvania actively promotes discussion among incoming parents. They begin their transition program with a video of telephone skits similar to those of Washington University. After the video and formal presentation by professional staff, they provide an opportunity for small group discussions among "new parents"—those taking their first child to college—and "veteran" parents. The veteran parents are asked to talk about the most significant issue for them during their student's first year of college and how they, as parents, dealt with the issue. Then they are asked to describe the most significant issue for their son or daughter and how they (the parents) dealt with it.

The discussion that ensues is lively, sometimes emotional, and almost always filled with useful information. In the final part of the program, the

small groups share a synopsis of their discussion with the large group, and the participants examine which strategies were successful. An accompanying set of handouts reinforces the program by outlining the rhythm of the academic year, and the transition issues that are likely to occur each month. These written materials provide parents with an ongoing resource to turn to after orientation is finished (Kashner, 1999).

Transition programs such as the ones described here often break the tension and validate parents' feelings. They provide an emotional release and an opportunity to laugh and sometimes to cry together. They foster healthy separation and give parents the tools to support their students in appropriate ways. Implicit in these programs is the message that parents remain an anchor for their students and play an important role in helping them to gain the most from their college years.

*Giving Parents Information and Tools to Support Student Success.* Before parents physically arrive on campus, orientation directors and other university personnel prepare the most important information through a variety of media. They must always keep the needs of multiple audiences in mind while developing this foundation material.

As more parents become Internet-savvy, e-mail messages and parent Web pages increasingly become important means of communicating information to parents. Parent Web pages usually include information about orientation and encourage parents to attend. The more comprehensive sites include links to all major campus services, administrative offices, and academic departments. They also include academic calendars and schedules of campus events, as well as links to parent organizations and other resources specifically designed for parents and families.

Creative use of the Web and e-mail can play a big role in establishing a connection with parents in other countries. Although some international students arrive on campus accompanied by their parents or even multigenerational extended families, many parents of international students cannot make the trip abroad. International parents may not speak English fluently, and may be particularly concerned about issues such as safety and medical care in the United States, as well as the obvious distance that will separate them from their student. Many are not familiar with the basic structure of American higher education or the resources available to students. With assistance from faculty or international graduate students, it may be possible to post important information or send electronic mail in the parents' native language. Efforts of this kind give international parents a better understanding of the university and its resources, while allowing them to support actively their son's or daughter's success from afar.

In spite of the proliferation of electronic communication, some parents still prefer to hold information in their hands. As part of the orientation function, many schools produce a parent handbook, which introduces parents to the administrators on campus and briefly describes the institution's philosophy, policies, and resources. It may also include basic information

about everything from dining services and computer connections to the size of the beds and telephone numbers of bakeries that deliver birthday cakes to campus.

Some parents arrive on campus barely having glanced at the literature that the university sent them. Others read it all and only ask specific questions about a particular area. A comprehensive parent orientation program needs to meet a wide range of parent issues by offering a variety of targeted programs, topical panels, open houses, broad informational sessions, and opportunities for individual consultation.

Alumni parents may know the institution but often seek an opportunity to speak with a member of the administration or faculty directly. Receptions for alumni and their children provide an opportunity to meet other graduates, renew old acquaintances, and talk with members of the administration. Other special interest sessions include programs for parents of students with disabilities, athletes, students of color, international students, students interested in going abroad, and students who commute from home. Many of these programs not only give parents information specific to them but also provide an opportunity to connect with other parents who have similar interests or concerns.

Academic open houses provide parents with an opportunity to meet faculty members and learn firsthand about the curriculum of individual departments. Some schedules include faculty lectures, often showcasing high-quality teaching. These academic programs introduce parents to the expectations of college faculty and give parents a realistic view of the challenges their sons and daughters will face.

The University of Oregon provides parents with a simulation of the first day of classes. Faculty members distribute a syllabus and discuss their expectations of the class. This helps parents of first-generation students gain a better understanding of what will occur in the classroom; for parents who attended college, it emphasizes the current academic side of the institution. This session also helps make the faculty more real to the parents (L. M. Connell, personal communication, Oct. 2000).

Almost all parent orientation programs include programs about the services on campus, such as health and counseling, academic support, career development, food, housing, and financial aid. Formats vary from open houses to panel presentations and resource fairs. Many institutions include interactive programs that provide parents an opportunity to learn about the institution and share concerns at the same time. At Virginia Tech, the parents participate in a session called the Hokie Parent Quiz (G. V. Wolcott, personal communication, June 2000). At the University of Denver's SOAR program, parents discover campus resources by participating in a scavenger hunt (S. Welter, personal communication, June 2000). In all of these sessions, in addition to conveying concrete information administrators may emphasize that, rather than intervening on their student's behalf, parents can support success and foster independence by encouraging the use of campus resources.

*Defining the Relationship Between Parents and the Institution.* Colleges and universities begin to set the tone for their relationship with parents long before they arrive on campus. An increasing number of institutions take an active approach to communicating with parents via parent Web sites and newsletters. Some sites include e-mail addresses of administrators in the parent program, who respond to inquiries from parents of prospective, incoming, and current students. Some institutions that are particularly “parent-friendly” establish toll-free numbers prior to orientation, encouraging parents to turn directly to the parent office for information or assistance.

Although parents may appreciate this kind of customer service, it is important for colleges to set boundaries that make it clear that their primary relationship is with the students. For instance, a staff member might suggest to an inquiring parent that it would be helpful for her son to communicate directly with his adviser or dean to get further information about a particular concern. The message that parents are valued partners, and that they play an important role in fostering their student’s independence, is implicit in this kind of assistance.

Once on campus, large informational meetings hosted by the president or dean introduce parents to the big picture, including the broader goals of the university, a profile of the students, expectations of new students, opportunities awaiting undergraduates, and the general relationship between the institution and parents. Frequently, the message is one of parents as partners. To some parents, this may be a mixed message. The parents hear that they and the academic institution need to have a strong relationship; however, the institution may not disclose the student’s grades or judicial information when asked by a concerned parent. Institutional policies of confidentiality and explicit messages from administrators and faculty reinforce the notion that the college’s primary relationship is with the students, not the parents.

Administrators often refer to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 when explaining the rationale for their policies. It is not uncommon to hear a bemused parent respond, “You tell me we’re partners in our student’s education. You’ll send us his tuition bills, but you won’t send us his grades?” or “We’ve heard all about the wonderful academic support services, but you won’t call us if our daughter skips a lot of classes?” Because colleges and universities interpret or implement these issues differently, it is essential to inform parents exactly what communication they should or should not expect from the institution.

Institutional messages and expectations must be shared consistently throughout the campus community. The culture of the development office, the health and counseling service, and the dean’s office may differ greatly when it comes to communicating with parents, so administrators who interact with parents need to recognize the differences in their policies or they may unwittingly frustrate parents by raising unrealistic expectations. It takes the combined effort of administrators and faculty to communicate clearly and create the most positive experience possible for the families of new students.

*Creating a Connection to the Institution.* Campus traditions and rituals can promote a long-lasting sense of connection to the institution. Many institutions now include parents in the traditions that once were reserved for current students or alumni.

Something as simple as teaching the university fight song to parents during the welcome session helps family members at the University of Michigan develop a sense of belonging and excitement engendered by Big Ten sports. At Georgia Tech, the school mascot attends a lunch and information fair for parents. This adds an element of fun and a touch of school spirit to the panel discussions and information sessions (A. Stalzer, personal communication, October 2000).

At Trinity University in San Antonio during summer orientation, the parents attend a session about the history of the university. This multimedia presentation is a preview of what the students will hear in the fall during their first night on campus. Later at a welcoming ritual, the parents climb to the top of the campus tower for a tower party. This gives parents an opportunity to participate in a ritual that their sons and daughters will experience with their classmates when they arrive on campus in the fall. This student ritual, which is repeated four years later just before graduation, resonates with meaning and memories for parents as well as students (D. Tuttle, personal communication, October 2000). Reflecting the religious values of its institution, Mount St. Mary College in New York brings students and parents together for a candlelight mass before the parents head home.

Stanford University takes advantage of sunny September days to hold its opening convocation for parents and new students outdoors on the main quad. With banners flying and a procession filled with the pomp and color of academic regalia, this opening ceremony provides a visual reminder to both students and parents that a transition has taken place. Students have left high school behind and entered a new community rich in history, with its own brand of open-air ceremonies and traditions.

Washington University in St. Louis concludes its academic convocation for students and parents with a symbolic nighttime procession. After the formal indoor ceremony, parents are dismissed and asked to line the main walkway of campus. Parents and families, holding glow sticks, line the path and light the way for faculty, senior administrators, and shortly thereafter, the students. After the procession, everyone convenes for jazz and frozen custard, a St. Louis tradition.

**Developing the Program.** Whether an institution is developing its first parent orientation or reviewing its current program, today's rapidly changing environment requires thoughtful planning and consideration of the following questions:

- Who are the students and their families? What are the percentages of students who are first generation? International? Commuters? Of color? Ethnically diverse? Children of alumni? From single parent or blended families?



- What is the size of the incoming class? How many parents and families are likely to attend?
- Where are students from? Will a high percentage of families be traveling long distances to get there?
- How complex is the institution? Is there one undergraduate college or are there several undergraduate schools?
- What is the institutional structure of the parent relations function? Is there a separate office of parent programs? Who are the major players? What is the relationship with the development office, the president, and the deans?
- What are the institutional norms, messages, and policies regarding relationships with parents and families?
- What are the nuances of the institution or of the geographic region that are meritorious of attention or celebration during orientation events?

As today's administrators plan programs for tomorrow's parents, they will need to make choices about timing, target audience, special services and programs, and the composition of the planning group in the context of demographics, structure, and goals of their own institutions.

*Timing: When and How Long.* The timing and length of parent orientation programs vary widely. In a survey of 299 four-year institutions of higher education, Badders (2000) found that slightly more than 40 percent of institutions hold their parent orientation programs during the summer. Most of these schools run programs throughout the summer, giving parents and students a choice of dates. This format works well for large campuses such as University of California at Berkeley or University of Wisconsin, allowing them to introduce new students and their parents to the institution in small groups.

Trinity University in San Antonio, with an entering class of around 650, chooses to hold its orientation for parents and guardians of new students in the summer, even though the student orientation does not take place until fall. This approach allows the Trinity administrators to focus their complete attention on the parents while on campus. The parents, who can choose to sleep in the residence halls and eat in the dining halls, have an opportunity to "live the experience of Trinity" (Trinity University, 2000).

Badders (2000) found that approximately 24 percent of colleges and universities provide programs for parents and students in the fall just before classes begin, and a little over 20 percent offer programs in both summer and fall. George Washington University in Washington, D.C., for instance, runs four student and parent programs during the summer and one immediately prior to the start of classes. Although many George Washington students and parents prefer to come in the summer, the geographical diversity of the student body precludes an extra trip to campus for some (C. Campbell, personal communication, September 2000).

Badders's sample also indicates that most programs (nearly 64 percent) last one day or less. The remaining range from one and a half to three days

in length. Regardless of program duration, almost all institutions separate parents and students for some part of the experience. Institutional norms vary from those that encourage parents to attend their student's academic advising meeting to those that prohibit it. Each institution must establish its own balance between joint and separate programs for parents and students. The challenge rests in creating appropriate boundaries that will support families throughout this transition while assisting students in their move toward independence. Many parent orientation brochures conclude by clearly stating an intended departure time for families.

*Language and Target Audience.* Many schools have changed the name of their program from parent orientation to family orientation. The decision about what to call the program should be made in conjunction with those responsible for other parent or family relations activities, such as fall and spring weekends, Web sites, and newsletters. Institutional research on the parent population may also provide direction for appropriate word choice for specific programs. The language used should reflect the activities actually offered. For instance, George Washington University's Colonial Inauguration Parent and Sibling Program offers a full complement of activities specially designed for younger brothers and sisters.

Regardless of program title, sensitivity to language can help all family members feel included by highlighting that many families consist of single parents, blended and extended families, and same-gender couples. For example, when two students are performing a skit about calling home, one can play the role of the child of a single parent. Instead of referring to "Mom and Dad" in speeches, administrators can refer to "a parent" or when appropriate "a family member."

*Special Programs and Services.* A review of parent orientation brochures from institutions around the country reveals a host of special programs, from a two-day series for parents of international students (including a dinner with the university president) to a two-and-a-half-hour session on academic information for parents of athletes. Special events for parents of students with honorary scholarships, parents of students of color, and parents of students in special academic programs are among the most common. Special services may include interpreters for international parents, signers for the hearing impaired, wheelchairs, kosher or vegetarian food options, little-siblings events, and babysitting services.

*Administrative Structure.* Who is in charge? Who is involved? An effective parent orientation program that meets the needs of multiple constituencies cannot be planned in isolation. Collaboration among administrative and academic departments is essential. On many campuses, the office with prime responsibility for the program, whether housed in alumni and development services, parent programs, or student affairs, establishes an advisory committee to ensure that institutional goals are met and key constituencies are represented. Among the most important issues to review include the amount and source of institutional funding and whether to charge parents, and if so, how

much. The group must agree about the key messages to be delivered and the key players to be included in the program. Offices all across the campus should receive copies of the information so that they can work with families from the same frame of reference. In fact, the advisory committee should solicit input from any number of campus resources so that the many voices on campus blend into one common chorus.

## **Conclusion**

In order to meet the multiple needs of today's diverse families, colleges and universities must regularly re-examine their parent orientation programs. Most institutions offer programs for parents or families that are far more substantive than the punch-and-cookies receptions of generations past.

The major components of effective parent orientation programs acknowledge and support the family transition, give parents information and tools to support student success, define the nature of the relationship between parents and the institution, and create an ongoing connection to the institution.

Representatives from a significant number of departments and interest groups should be involved in planning parent orientation. The planners need to make decisions within the context of their institutional culture about the timing and length of the program, the language for describing the target audience, what types of special programs and services to offer, and the administrative structure of the planning group. Well-designed parent orientation programs are a valuable asset for students, families, and the institution.

A strong parent orientation program plays an important role in promoting students' success and creating an appropriate, rewarding partnership between parents and university administrators. In the parent orientation brochure sent to parents and guardians of new students at Trinity University, Dean of Students and Director of Residential Life David Tuttle writes, "There is a file on my desk marked 'Parent Orientation rosters,' which contains lists of those who have attended recent Parents' Orientation programs. As do other colleagues, when I receive a call from parents about a concern, I immediately check to see if they have attended Parents' Orientation. If so, I know that they have heard from me and my colleagues firsthand, are probably comfortable with us and how we operate, and that we can start the conversation at a certain level of understanding. This common point of view can make all the difference" (Trinity University, 2000, p. 2).

A common point of view developed through a successful parent orientation is valuable to students and staff as well as parents. Parents who understand the institution and today's college scene are more likely to know when to support their children from a distance and when to intervene. They develop a clearer understanding of what is expected of their son or daughter, and what resources exist. They move beyond the glossy hype of the viewbooks and focus on a more realistic notion of the pressures and challenges

facing new college students. They know how to help their student access appropriate resources when in need.

Every year, widely diverse parents of new college students arrive on campus filled with anticipation and anxiety. They are eager to gather information and are grateful for the opportunity to connect with the institution that will play such an important role in the life of their student. Once the connection is made, most parents welcome the ongoing relationship fostered via parent and family weekends, parent newsletters, and Web sites.

An effective parent orientation program lays the groundwork for parental involvement and ongoing support for admissions and retention, career services, and fundraising. It is no surprise that most colleges and universities discover that an effective parent orientation program is, indeed, a valuable asset for the subsequent relationships with multiple points within the campus community.

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