



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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THE MISSING INGREDIENT IN STUDENT ORIENTATION

Every year, colleges and universities look for creative and more effective ways to run student orientation programs, which are fundamental to making strong connections with new students and facilitating their adjustment to college. Offices of Student Services are charged with delivering ever more innovative and engaging experiences to welcome students and to enhance and support the student experience.

Traditional Orientation Programs

Orientation programs are typically comprised of a series of events and workshops that introduce students to support services, financial aid options, the student association, advising and counseling services, campus tours, residence life, and athletic programs and teams, as well as social events and parent workshops. All of these elements are crucial to helping students begin to feel at home in their new academic environment. However, there is often one missing component that makes the transition to postsecondary even easier and more meaningful to students. It also serves to reassure students that they have made the right choice, and at the same time, informs and speaks to their individual reasons for choosing their postsecondary institution.

The Missing Ingredient: Career-Based Workshop

The missing component of an effective orientation program is a career-based workshop that is critical to student success, retention, and persistence. This career component, which is often delivered in an academic setting, is a vital addition to a student services-based orientation program and ensures that all students in all programs are exposed to a common motivational and educational foundation. We traditionally focus on offering career workshops when students are nearing graduation. But, when we include career information in our orientation programs, we start students off on Day 1 with the information they are most looking for when they first set foot on campus.

Elements of the Career Workshop

The content of this dynamic career workshop is based

on thousands of first-year student surveys we have conducted that tell us what motivates postsecondary students:

- Understanding how their education relates to a satisfying career that pays well.
- Believing that their education is valuable and worthwhile.
- Developing long-term self-sufficiency—lifelong skills that ensure they have a high-performance career.
- Lowering their anxiety about being able to graduate and become gainfully employed.

An effective career workshop should outline career-specific and program-based employability skills, as well as information about industry and the job market. This information illustrates the various career paths that are available to students after graduation, which decreases students' high anxiety about (1) whether they are in the right program, (2) how they are going to make a living, and (3) if the program they have chosen will help them toward that end. The workshop gives students a roadmap of where their education is taking them and identifies the skills and qualities required of them to reach their destination.

Job Versus Career

The best way to begin a career seminar is to take students through a variety of interactive exercises that help them understand the value of their education as it relates to a career. It also helps them understand the commitment it takes to pursue a high-performance career. By comparing the characteristics of minimum wage jobs and high-performance careers, and then by having students calculate the lifetime earning potential difference between a minimum wage job and a professional career, students become self-motivated to pursue a career, which starts with their academic program/course of study. The next step is to give students a tangible picture of where their education will take them. Faculty members can provide students with an overview of their own professional journeys so that students can see "real-life" career options, and at the same time realize that it is rare to have a straight-line path to the "perfect career." Industry speakers, including

alumni, can describe typical careers and outline the job sectors and positions students can expect to find upon graduation. Career services staff can outline the career competencies required in each career stream, industry trends, and entry-level job opportunities. Internship and volunteer experience opportunities can also be covered at this point.

Professionals in Training

When students have a clear picture of where their studies are taking them and begin to perceive themselves as “professionals in training,” they can start from Day 1 to work on developing their skills with an end goal in mind. Students with this perspective are more likely to persevere. Instead of seeing their courses as academic requirements, they begin to see each course as professional development for a career. Work ethic and academic commitment can be further encouraged when students understand that it takes 2,000 hours of dedicated practice and learning—including course work, volunteer assignments, and internship experience—to develop entry-level career skills, which is the equivalent of anywhere from 12 months to 4 years in an educational setting.

Building Strengths

Developing employability skills and student strengths are the final two components of this workshop. We use UCLA Coach Emeritus John Wooden’s *Pyramid of Success* and a series of interactive exercises to help students recognize their current strengths and determine which individual skills and qualities they would like to develop further. We also outline the workplace skills that employers in their industry have identified as essential.

General Arts and Science Programs

Whether your orientation program is targeting students enrolled in arts or science programs, a career workshop is still an integral part of a comprehensive student orientation model. The workshop can be structured around the concept of Me Inc.*: be your own company, and build your own collection of individual success skills—including self-management skills—that are applicable to academic and lifelong career settings. Me Inc. topics include building individual strengths; developing employability skills; understanding the importance of a work ethic; building a systems approach to school and career work; and developing organizational skills, interpersonal skills, fundamental skills, and communication skills.

Improved Student Commitment and Student Satisfaction

Career information workshops offer clear answers to: Why this program? Why this course? Why this institution? Why invest in the work ethic it takes to be

successful in college? When students are armed with relevant and meaningful answers to these questions, they can then approach college with their new “professional in training” perspective. This information addresses student-identified needs, which in turn results in increased student satisfaction.

Outcome: Improved Retention and Graduation Rates

A career-based workshop taps into students’ motivation, and our research shows that after a meaningful start on Day 1, students are more confident, more committed to their program of study, and more certain they will graduate, which is the best predictor of student retention. When this career component is implemented during orientation and for the right reasons—to help students forge a meaningful life, while equipping them with relevant employability skills—we end up with the desired outcome of improving our retention numbers and graduation rates.

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The interactive exercises referred to in this article are taken from *Making Your Mark, High-Performance College and Career Success*, 9th edition.

*Me Inc. is one of the foundations of Making Your Mark. Career-based student orientation resources can be downloaded at makingyourmark.com.