

ORIENTATION PROCEDURES: A COUNSELLING SERVICE VIEW

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At Flinders University, orientation camps, or "fresher" camps, have always been considered a major function of the Students' Association. Indeed, even with some financial support from the University, student groups of one kind or another have always determined the format, the nature and the place for orientation camps. For these and other reasons, orientation camps have always emphasised social events likely to help new students meet other new students.

In successive years, the emphasis of the orientation camps has changed depending largely on the minority of students who happened to be "organising" the camps in any one year. If a politically oriented student group took the helm, as it were, then new students would be treated to a steady diet of Marx and the need for revolution. If a religiously oriented student group found itself responsible, then new students were treated to an intensive diet of Jesus and the nature of human values. One year, a sexually "liberated" group dominated the student planning organisation and mixed sleeping arrangements for new students were the initial highlighting feature.

Another, but more consistent feature of orientation camps, was that they were always scheduled miles and miles away from the University campus. In addition, they were "organised" at the last moment and were always, therefore, hastily arranged affairs. Further, on Orientation Day, a day which was set aside for new students to spend on campus, the same student organisers scheduled the activities to take place there; thus these particular days over the years also emphasised "heavy" political lines and the like and were little different from the camps that preceded them.

From a participative point of view, not many students were ever involved in orientation camps. Probably less than 2% of the entire first year intake ever went to an orientation camp for at least two reasons. One reason was that many secondary school students knew that the camps stood for indoctrination of some kind and the other reason was that despite University funding, the cost of attending a camp for any individual was relatively expensive.

Another feature of these student run camps, apart from hasty and poor organisation, and issues of indoctrination and exploitation, was that no one really knew how the participants reacted to their

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experiences. True, the Counselling Service of the University saw its usual steady trickle of bitterly upset students who, as participants, had been traumatised by their camp experiences. True, the Health Service of the University saw its usual steady trickle of students suffering from gastrointestinal upsets because of makeshift and inadequate facilities for food preparation, delivery and consumption. But the over-riding feature was that if you were a senior student with a religious or whatever bent and you had got your "message" across with sufficient vehemence and determination, then you had, *per se*, done an exceedingly fine and thorough job.

Evaluation simply consisted of asking those participants who appeared to have liked what was going on for their opinion of what was going on and that was sufficient unto the day and the purpose. Little wonder, then, that when questions conveying the nature of the importance of what had happened were asked, such questions were either given some affirmative response or were dismissed as irrelevant or unanswerable. When pressed, though, the organisers always fell back on the socially oriented rationalisation that if nothing of any importance had been accomplished, at least the students who had participated in the camps had got to know one another, or some such.

The Counselling Service at Flinders University had always been involved in orientation camps. The involvement was two fold: one facet of the Counselling Service's involvement was picking up the casualties during and after the camps and the other was in the form of repeated requests from the student organisers for training in small group interaction skills. The Counselling Service responded to both forms of involvement, but in the latter request, training always proved impossible because the senior student "leaders" were really not interested in learning the basic skills of listening to others, clarifying, reflecting, highlighting and so on. They simply wanted to prepare their speeches and the things they wished to attend to and that was that.

However, because of the continuous two fold involvement of the Counselling Service with the orientation camp "system", the drawbacks of the camps had become patently obvious and this enabled us to draw up a blueprint for an orientation experience that we felt would better reflect the needs of the participants. The first aim of the Counselling Service's blueprint for orientation procedures was that orientation should involve new

students in becoming oriented to the University campus, that is, orientation should take place on campus and not somewhere off in the bush.

The Counselling Service believed that:

- orientation procedures should not be conceived as one day or one week affairs, but should be regarded as ongoing support for new students at least during their first year at the University. An orientation week, then, would be regarded within this context as merely an initiating experience;
- the planning of an orientation week, together with subsequent orientation procedures, should be invested in a properly set up University committee representative of most, if not all, of the various sections of the University. This committee would have access to University monies to carry out its programme;
- orientation procedures should involve academic activities, social activities, personal interest activities and so on. A balanced programme, in other words, of all aspects of university life;
- orientation should be planned by a representative committee of the University which met regularly over an entire academic year so that well thought out procedures could be planned and subsequently invoked;
- the orientation planning committee would design questionnaires and other data collecting devices so that a thorough and objective evaluation could be made of its entire orientation programme by all of the participants.

Finally, by attending to all or most of the foregoing the old Students' Association concept for fresher students of "screw and spew" would be finished for all time, at least as far as University-sponsored orientation procedures were concerned.

Rigorous evaluation techniques applied to orientation camps had always been resisted vehemently by the student organisers. Left to collect their own evaluative data in their own way they were free to say what suited them. However, before the old system of student-run orientation camps had been finally killed, as it were, the Counselling Service had designed and circulated a questionnaire to all 1975 first year undergraduate students. A 60.7% response rate was obtained.

The questionnaire was designed to sample opinions concerning a range of problems likely to be encountered by first year students in their efforts to fit in with the University environment.* This survey also contained questions which enabled respondents to suggest ways of overcoming transition problems and difficulties. And finally, for those first year students who had attended orientation camps, questions were provided which enabled that group to evaluate their own camp experiences.

*Copies of this study, "First Year University Students' Attitudes Towards the Orientation Process", are available upon request from the author, K. J. Bush, Counselling Service, Flinders University of South Australia.

In general, the results of the survey indicated that most first year students on campus felt that orientation procedures should help people to get to know each other, but that should not be the sole purpose. A strongly expressed conviction was that orientation procedures should provide opportunities for people to obtain academic and study skills related information. For those respondents who had attended orientation camps, none felt that the camps had provided any viable academic information at all. And further, persons who had attended the camps expressed their dissatisfaction with the poor organisation of the camps, the poor facilities provided by the organisers, the overemphasis by the organisers on various forms of political indoctrination and the general monopolisation of activities by the camp organisers and senior student leaders in attendance.

With regard to a question concerning an alternative system to the existing orientation camp system, the majority of first year students (including those who had not attended camps) expressed the view quite strongly that an alternative to the camp system needed to be found (63%). These respondents felt that a few days of indoctrination at a camp was not likely to be of much help with difficulties involved in getting in coping contact with university life. These students suggested that an adequate orientation programme should not be limited to the first week of term. They pointed out that problems of adaptation, particularly those of an academic nature, could be best met as these arose. They stressed the need for an ongoing programme of at least one academic year in duration.

The respondents also felt that the camp system excluded the potentially valuable contribution of all kinds of on-campus resources and personnel. Greater use of such resources and personnel was perceived by them as being extremely necessary to the facilitation of the orientation process. Thus it was felt that orientation was a procedure which should involve the university and all its resources and that orientation should be sited on campus.

A major problem as perceived by first year students was concerned with feelings of inadequacy with regard to study skills. The second major area of difficulty perceived was of a personal-social nature. Learning to become responsible for, and to, oneself, and being with a range of new people in a strange environment, had brought to them some fears of alienation and insecurity. First year students also listed additional problems, such as, ascertaining academic staff's expectations of them; discovering on-campus facilities; coping with (new) financial difficulties; rethinking moral, personal and educational values, and adjusting to changes in lifestyle.

Again, the major areas of transition difficulties as expressed by these respondents, pointed to the inadequacies of the existing orientation approach of

the camp system. It was now quite clear that the problems outlined by these students demanded a comprehensive programme, catering for a range of individual needs, a programme necessitating careful planning, rather than haphazard, spontaneous and "inspired happenings".

As a result of this study, the Counselling Service recommended that a two-part programme, with financial support from the University, be planned and implemented in 1976, by a committee of individuals carefully selected for this purpose.

The 1976 Orientation Programme

The 1976 programme was planned by a University Orientation Sub-committee which was formed eight months prior to Orientation Week to complete the planning task. University financial support was received, and this enabled the programme to be implemented in accordance with its planned objectives. The Committee consisted of five students, two academic staff members, the Secondary Schools Liaison Officer, one member of the Counselling Service, one administrative staff member, and the University's Research Officer (seconded).

The programme which emerged represented a balance of activities designed to familiarise new students in three directions: (a) general information about on-campus facilities and resource personnel; (b) academic information and activities; and (c) social information and activities. Students also had the option of "living-in" on campus during Orientation Week. Many respondents in the 1975 survey had indicated a preference for this opportunity.

A special feature of the 1976 Orientation Week programme was the "care group" concept. In previous years, first year students contacting the Health and Counselling Services had expressed feelings of bewilderment and loneliness during Orientation Weeks which consistently expressed a "fend for yourself, no one cares" attitude. In 1976 new students were divided into small groups, each guided by a senior student who had undergone a training session in elementary communication and social skills. The members of these "care groups" all met socially with their trained senior student leaders on the Sunday preceding Orientation Week, and subsequently throughout the week. These groups then provided points of reference and support for their members.

The care group concept was regarded by the Orientation planners as one of the most important aspects of the total programme. However, the success of its implementation rested heavily on concise and careful organisation. In practical terms, this involved a working party of six in obtaining the names and addresses of all new 1976 enrolments, contacting these people (by telephone, or by letter) and assigning them to a group, before Orientation Week began. The composition of each group was

structured to incorporate a mixture of ages and academic interests.

The only real difficulty emerged in relation to contacting late enrolments and assigning them to an appropriate group. Many students arrived during Orientation Week and several new groups had to be created at the last minute. It was made clear in the evaluative report that a pre-planned "mop up" system will be necessary in future to cater more efficiently for late arrivals. Apart from this latter organisation difficulty, the care group system was implemented smoothly. Given the relatively small size of the Flinders' population, the effective use of the care group approach by larger universities could be achieved, with a larger working group than was needed at Flinders. We intend to experiment with the care group system by extending it over the entire first year so that first year students will be able to meet their leaders regularly and on a long-term basis.

Evaluation of the 1976 Orientation Week programme was made through a questionnaire which was distributed to new students at the end of Orientation Week.* Some of the respondents' reactions included the perceived value of the various information-giving sessions. As one example, first year students placed the highest value on a panel discussion by Welfare Services personnel. Under the old "fresher" camp system, Welfare personnel had been denied direct access to new students on the grounds that students could explain the nature of welfare resources to other students better than could the professionals involved in such services. These respondents rated the library and general campus tours highly. Again information regarding day-to-day campus life was regarded as an important aspect of orientation.

Specimen lectures and information about academic departments organised and presented by academic staff were, in the main, well received too. Those sessions which had facilitated personal contact with members of academic staff were most highly valued.

Also well received were the social-entertainment features of Orientation Week. However, preference was shown for activities requiring an observer's (as opposed to a participant's) role. Several activities designed for new students with special interests received overwhelmingly favourable reactions. Such special activities included a Parents' Evening, a Part-time Students' Evening and the Mature Age Students' Evening.

The ideas and actions of the "care group" system were positively received. These small groups were appreciated for having provided constant and predictable care and support to all concerned. New students felt that there was a place for them and a variety of other students to whom they could relate

*Copies of this study, "The 1976 Orientation Programme: An Evaluation", are available upon request from the authors, K. J. Bush and P. Sheldrake, Flinders University of South Australia.

quickly and ably under the direction of the trained student leaders.

All in all, then, the 1976 Orientation Week programme at Flinders University was judged as being highly successful by those who participated. We believe that its success was largely due to the following factors — the programme represented months of fastidious **planning**; this was achieved by a committee which was **representative** of a wide cross section of the campus population; the programme was well organised; its sessions catered for a range of needs and interests; it was attended by some 80% of new students; and all of this was made financially possible by the \$3,000 grant from the University. On the basis of the built-in evaluative procedures, further Orientation Weeks can be planned with increasing adequacy.

Where Now?

Organising support programmes for new students over their entire first year at Flinders University has

been part of our orientation procedures for 1976. A study skills programme has been conducted by the Counselling Service — in response to the major stated need in relation to ongoing orientation. Descriptions and an evaluation of these orientation procedures will be made at the end of this year and a detailed report will be written. Perhaps the most important facet of the orientation procedures for 1976 at Flinders was our determination to assess our plans and activities in terms of participant reactions and satisfaction. Such feedback is crucial if we are really serious about providing new students with the kinds of experiences that they feel will be of value to them. And as a result of further evaluative follow-up, it should be possible for us to estimate with accuracy and reliability the efficacy of the various orientation strategies which have been featured within the context of Orientation procedures at Flinders University. The way would now seem to be clear for some regular and systematic improvement in our Orientation programmes, year by year.