Orienting Mid-Level Student Affairs Professionals

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Mid-level managers comprise a large proportion of student affairs organizations. They are often the most overlooked when it comes to professional orientation and institutional introduction when entering new positions. Accordingly, information is presented from the professional literature that speaks to the characteristics and unique needs of this administrative cohort, with attention to orientation needs, including life and work transition, role complexity, leadership demands, and technical skills requirements. Finally, a process developed for a mid-size, private university's student affairs division is offered as an example for preparing orientation for mid-level staff.

Employees play a central role in creating and sustaining quality higher education institutions. In both academic and co-curricular departments, the skills and commitment of people who comprise the workforce are essential to an institution's effectiveness. Despite this, a national study of staffing practices in student affairs found that they are often given cursory treatment (Winston & Creamer, 1997). Furthermore, Winston and Creamer noted that new employee orientation is among the staffing practices that are both an area of importance and a topic largely neglected in the literature. Since Winston and Creamer's study, this issue has remained largely unaddressed in the professional literature (Carpenter, 2001).

This article addresses orientation practices for a specific category of staff: mid-level student affairs professionals. Position orientation is important for every new hire. However, this particular level of staff is addressed for two primary reasons: (1) mid-level positions are purported to be particularly complex positions, suggesting unique needs for support (Ackerman, 2007; Ellis and Moon, 1991; Scott, 1978; and Young, 1990), and (2) there is an absence of orientation and other support mechanisms for mid-level positions (Winston & Creamer, 1997).

Why Orientation?

Starting a new position is viewed as a major life transition, which normally indicates a period of significant, personal challenge (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). While some element of challenge is inevitable, providing inadequate support for new employees can create problems for both the institution and the individual staff person (Carpenter, 2001; Mondy, 2008). Organizations suffer when they do not attend to employees' needs (Pfeffer, 2007). A thoughtful, well-designed new staff orientation program is an important means for a student affairs division and an institution to demonstrate necessary support for new employees. Mondy points out that "first impressions are often the most lasting," and "orientation programs give organizations an opportunity to begin the relationship with a good start" (p. 215).

Carpenter (2001) compared inadequate orientation of a new staff member to driving a new car without reading the owner's manual. Both are commonplace, but neither is advisable. Indeed, the consequences of putting a staff person to work without providing position orientation are serious. Thus, Carpenter asserted that sound orientation of new staff is "ethically necessary" (p 225).

Despite its importance, there is evidence that new employee orientation programs in student affairs are often inadequate. In a survey of 67 student affairs professionals who had changed institutions (Winston & Creamer, 1997), a majority of respondents reported that 11 of 15 orientation subjects were addressed poorly or not at all. Subjects that were reportedly addressed well by at least 50 percent of respondents were "introduction to staff" (79%), "student population characteristics" (55%), "performance expectations" (54%), and "benefits plan" (50%). Subjects that were least likely to be addressed well were "unwritten institutional expectations," "staff development policies," "relevant resources (e.g., library, professional literature, equipment)," and "faculty characteristics."

Orientation best practices from both higher education and business sectors suggest that it must not be a one-shot event, but an ongoing process (Carpenter, 2001; Mondy, 2008; Winston & Creamer, 1997). Winston and Creamer describe orientation as a process beginning with recruitment and selection and proceeding through "an intentional process of acclimation at the beginning of employment" (p. 160). Carpenter lays out a year long process for ongoing orientation, which addresses the first day in the office and extends through the first year. Rather than reiterate the process well described by other authors, this article focuses on the unique features and orientation needs of those positions considered mid-level. A host of researchers (Ackerman, 2007; Cooper & Saunders, 1999; Ellis & Moon, 1991; Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; and Young, 1990, 2007) have attested to the particular challenges associated with mid-level staff positions.

Mid-level Orientation Needs

Mid-level college and university administrators are integral to the life of an institution. These staff members are experienced professionals, usually possess graduate degrees, and have a strong commitment to their profession (Rosser, 2000). According to Rosser, they comprise the largest administrative group in most college and university systems. In addition to being large in number, these staff members carry key responsibilities in enacting university missions (W. Young, 2007).

Despite their numbers and significance, this substantial group of staff was long ignored in the literature of the field (Ackerman, 2007; Cooper & Saunders, 1999; Ellis & Moon, 1991; Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; and Young, 1990, 2007). In his seminal book on mid-management in higher education, Scott (1978) referred to higher education mid-managers as anonymous leaders and unheralded heroes. Subsequently, Rosser (2000) referred to mid-level administrators as the "unsung professionals of the academy" (p. 5), and Young titled his book on mid-level managers, "The Invisible Leaders," and again in 2007, he suggests that they continue to be "easily ignored" (R. Young, 2007, p. 18).

In student affairs, mid-level staff members are represented as directors or associate or assistant directors of administrative units such as housing, student activities, judicial affairs, and orientation programs (Young, 1990). Chernow, Cooper, and Winston (2003) distinguished between two categories of student affairs mid-managers: advanced middle, representing staff who report directly to the senior student affairs officer, and the middle professional, who is further removed from the senior student affairs officer. Whether in the advanced middle or middle role, mid-level administrators serve the formidable role of bridging the gap between university policy makers and front line staff. As a result, their positions tend to be complex (Ellis & Moore, 1991; Jensen, 2000; R. Young, 2007). They are often expected to foster effectiveness with limited formal authority. One of the most important and formidable challenges of mid-level staff is dissecting the big picture as communicated from the upper administration, and delivering clear and concrete messages to front-line staff members. In a study of organizational communication, Jensen (2000) found that mid-managers in higher education endured more complexity related to decision-making and cognitive overload than any other staff level.

New mid-level staff hires may come from within an institution or enter into a new institutional setting. Additionally, they may be making a lateral move from another mid-level position or advance from an entry level position. The more novel the situation is for the person moving into the position, the more challenges the person will face. Specific orientation needs will vary to some degree from individual to individual. However, literature and research point to specific areas for attention and emphasis in an effective orientation program for new mid-level staff.

While inadequate orientation programs are a problem for all staff levels, the unique challenges and complexities common to mid-level staff members' transitions (Belch & Strange, 1995; Johnsrud, Sagaria, & Heck, 1992;

Winston & Creamer, 1997) warrant special consideration. A host of issues make the transitional needs of mid-level staff particularly challenging. First, in contrast to many entry-level professionals, mid-level staff members are less likely than entry-level staff to have a built-in informal network of peers within the institution who are familiar with their specific jobs and duties, or who are entering similar work within the institution at the same time. In addition, there may be a tendency for supervisors and other continuing staff to assume that, since mid-level staff members have previously worked in the field, there may be less of an emphasis on their orientation than with more novice professionals (Winston & Creamer). New staff members in mid-level positions are more likely than entry level staff to be making transitions with families; however, they are less likely than senior level staff to receive adequate organizational and financial assistance in their moves. Finally, because of high turnover rates in entry-level positions, well-developed orientation programs are more likely to exist for staff entering those roles. In contrast, mid-level administrators tend to remain longer in their positions (Johnsrud, Sagaria, & Heck) and, thus, institutional memory and formalization of the process by which these staff members are trained and acclimated to their roles frequently becomes shorter. Winston and Creamer noted key differences between the needs of entry-level professionals, who have a smaller locus of control, and mid-level administrators with greater supervisory, budgetary, and leadership responsibilities, pointing out that mid-level professionals are sometimes faced with a daunting learning curve.

In designing an orientation program for mid-level staff, it is important to take into consideration matters of life and work transition, role complexity, leadership demands, and technical skills. Each of these areas will be addressed, discussing implications for an orientation program, followed by a recommendation for a systematic approach to planning mid-level staff orientation.

In Transition

Assuming a mid-level administrator role represents a significant and transitory life event. Transitions into new mid-level positions can include a host of new challenges: learning about a new position, getting familiar with a new institution and community, and often facing personnel supervision for the first time.

Schlossberg's (1984, 2004) transition theory proposes that successful adaptation to any significant life event or transition, such as accepting a new mid-level position, is influenced by three sets of variables, which include the perception of the transition event, the pre/post transition environment, and the characteristics of the individual that experiences the transition.

Collectively, all three determine the impact that such a life event could have on the new mid-level staff member.

A transition perspective on adult development further proposes that significant life events such as starting a new position can be considered developmental; however, a positive resolution is not always guaranteed. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) identified four elements of a transition process in which their presence or absence could help or hinder a successful orientation and transition for a new or promoted mid-manager. Dubbed the "4 S's", these elements include the "situation" (timing, control, duration, etc.), "self" (personal characteristics such as age, gender, experience, and values), "support" systems available, and "strategies" such as stress management and coping mechanisms.

In providing for a successful transition for mid-level staffers, it is important to consider these "4 S's" in order to meet their developmental needs. In respect to situation, for example, focused and directly relevant information should be provided that are appropriate for experienced professionals. In respect to "self," the institution should be conscious of how characteristics such as race or gender may relate to the individual's transition. Special attention should be paid to supporting new staff members who may represent a population that is marginalized within an institution, division, or department. Personal or "self" resources could be bolstered by creating warm welcomes, facilitating important introductions, and providing referrals to helpful resources both within and outside the campus community. Support systems could be augmented by the student affairs division by providing pre-paid memberships for regional professional associations, sponsoring travel to role-supporting workshops, introducing new mid-managers to colleagues outside the division, and providing flexibility with non-accrued leave days if the mid-manager is new to the local community. Finally, specific strategies should be developed together with the mid-level staff member related to inheriting challenging issues such as staff performance concerns and other program-specific issues. In sum, it is better to anticipate concerns and offer early support than to wait until the new staff member has encountered problems.

While transition theory is helpful in identifying and addressing issues for mid-level staffers, applying it to a "one-size fits all" strategy of orientation should be avoided. Consideration should be given to the individual characteristics of the mid-manager receiving orientation. For example, is the staff person in question a new mid-manager for whom this can be considered a promotion from their current role, or could this be considered a lateral move from one mid-management position to another? How do specific skill sets differ between the previous and new position? Whether the mid-manager is internal to the organization or external is another important environmental consideration when developing an orientation program. As demonstrated, transition theory in mind, therefore, can serve as a heuristic for meeting the orientation needs of mid-level staff.

Complex and Ambiguous Roles

Mid-level positions are challenging, in large part, because they are in the middle. Scott (1978) and, later, Ellis and Moon (1991) highlighted the challenges inherent in bridging the gap between institutional leaders and front line staff. Middle managers are often in the delicate role of taking values and expectations from above and translating them to the practical realities, in light of student and employee behavior. Middle managers in residence life or judicial affairs, for example, are looked to by front line staff for specific guidance on translating lofty ideals of a university mission (e.g., "developing ethical and engaged citizenry") into the day-to-day realities of addressing student misconduct.

Being in the middle is but one of the challenges for mid-level managers. An added complication for higher education managers is that they are occupying this position in organizations that are highly complex, such as larger, more bureaucratic institutions (Strange & Banning, 2002). Small colleges can also present high levels of ambiguity as "roles and policies may be less formalized than in larger institutions" (Oblander, 2006, p. 32). Ellis and Moon (1991) point out that role messages, or messages that define the role of the mid-manager, are sent from a variety of sources and are often in conflict with one another. The mixed messages result in role ambiguity—another factor complicating this organizational position.

For the new mid-level manager, mixed messages can layer unnecessary challenges on a situation that is already anxiety filled. Although it is not possible to eliminate role ambiguity altogether, it can be reduced by ensuring that the new mid-manager understands the underlying values of the institution or work unit (Mondy, 2008). Kuh and Whitt (1988) and Schein (1992) point out that the assumptions underlying behavior are often hidden beneath culture members' conscious awareness. Thus, some ambiguity can be reduced well before the new employee begins the new position by conducting a cultural assessment that surfaces some of the organization's fundamental assumptions. Carpenter (2001) lists several matters of importance for an organization to make explicit to new employees, including identifying what behaviors are rewarded, dress expectations, and "unwritten survival rules" (p. 227).

Indeed, the new employee can be invited and even encouraged to participate in uncovering aspects of culture that lie beneath the consciousness of long-time members of the culture. This can occur by encouraging the employee to openly ask questions based on a fresh perspective of the institution or department. Anyone who has moved from one place to another is likely to encounter surprises at the new location—surprises that are often based on a lack of understanding of the idiosyncrasies of the environment. Not only is inviting questions helpful for the new staff person, but it can aid the institution in recognizing anachronistic behaviors that may be part of common institutional, divisional, or departmental practice (Schein, 1992).

Another essential approach to dealing with role ambiguity is connecting the new mid-level manager with peers who occupy similar roles. So, a new department director should be offered structured opportunities to meet with other department directors as part of the orientation schedule. The same holds true for staff at other levels. An associate director of one department should be scheduled to meet with peers in other departments. In addition to providing additional sources of personal support, these kinds of meetings can help clarify role expectations and provide exposure to models of success. Johnsrud and Rossser (1999) found that the development of collegial relationships is positively related to work morale.

New mid-level staff members' connections should expand beyond the division of student affairs. Faculty members and academic administrators can often serve as important resources for enriching one's professional effectiveness and, thus, are important to include as part of new mid-level staff members' introduction to their institution. Mills (1993) points out that building relationships with faculty is important for political reasons; the mid-manager can build rapport in order to garner understanding and support, while also understanding other perspectives on institutional culture.

Leadership Opportunities

Much of what has been written about mid-management positions in student affairs point to the immense challenges of these roles. It is also important to address a key asset that is inherent to the mid-managers role. That is, the organizational position of many mid-managers provides unique access to both the decision-making processes and the on-the-ground realities within the institution (Taylor, 2007). Because of this broad perspective, it is important to consider mid-level positions as playing an important role in organizational leadership.

While an antiquated perspective on leadership places authority and wisdom in the hands of a formal leader in an organizational hierarchy (Bass, 1990), newer models of leadership point to the potential to exercise leadership throughout the organization (Love & Estanek, 2004; Maxwell, 2005; Taylor, 2007). Love and Estanek discuss the importance of exercising leadership from all levels of an organization, while Taylor uses a transformational leadership framework to argue for the mid-level student affairs administrator to "lead from the middle"—a notion originally put forth by Maxwell. Leading from the middle involves promoting an organizational vision that originated from someone else's agenda, and leading and influencing others beyond the formal scope of the mid-manager's position.

In an assessment of senior student affairs officers' opinions of skill requirements, Cooper and Saunders (1999) found that leadership skills were the most important attributes for successful mid-managers in student affairs:

Personnel management and leadership skills, such as resolving interpersonal problems and conflicts, building effective working teams, collaborating with others, implementing effective decisions, persuading others and understanding organizational behavior were most essential for success at the midlevel (p. 187).

New mid-managers begin their positions with varying degrees of experience. Some have previously supervised, led teams, and occupied visible decision-making positions, while others have not. Among those who have prior leadership experience, some may have been supervising students, but not professional staff members. In many cases, new staff will experience a learning curve, not only in adapting to the complexities of their new environment, but also in expanding their skills to meet a higher and broader set of leadership demands.

Because of the importance of these skills for success in mid-level positions, divisions of student affairs should attend to leadership skills through an ongoing orientation program addressing matters such as communication, team-building and supervision. In larger institutions, a useful approach is to pair mid-level and senior staff to plan and facilitate workshops targeting mid-level staff, thus providing the mid-level manager a chance to learn from a more experienced administrator and, perhaps, expand the mid-manager's network of support. The workshops can be offered to all mid-level staff in the division. But, it is most essential that new mid-level staff participate. Whether at small or large institutions, a formalized leadership series can be helpful to all staff, but it is most important to engage new mid-level staff in such exercises.

Other Skills

Implicit in the discussions of mid-managers' challenging roles is the understanding that there are specific knowledge and skill requirements of these positions. Specific skill requirements will vary from position to position. Indeed, research on requisite skills for mid-level staff has demonstrated less importance for technical characteristics such as financial management and assessment skills, than for skills such as leadership, personnel management, and communication (Cooper & Saunders, 1999; Fey & Carpenter, 1996; and Sermershein & Keim, 2005). This is not surprising, as communication and leadership are general skills that are widely applicable and important to nearly all positions in student affairs. However, caution is recommended in drawing the conclusion that the other skills are unimportant. For instance, it is likely that mid-level roles vary considerably in the level of fiscal responsibilities. For those who are charged with budgetary responsibilities, there may be significant orientation needs. Additionally, the increased accountability requirements associated with skills in assessment portend the vital interests student affairs divisions have in ensuring that their mid-level staff members possess assessment competencies.

When orienting new mid-level staff members, divisions of student affairs should give attention to orientation in areas such as: fiscal management systems and strategies, technologies, personnel management processes, assessment strategies, and other skills that accompany the particular position.

A Mid-Level Staff Orientation Program Design

With the abundance of challenges facing new mid-level staff members and the reality that many supervisors cannot sufficiently prepare and execute staff orientation programs due to limitations in time and energy, a formal staff orientation model can help to ensure appropriate attention to the transitional issues of new hires. It is important to design an orientation program that recognizes the breadth and depth of knowledge necessary for staff in these positions to flourish. While all employees should receive core information (e.g., benefits programs, institutional policies, performance evaluation process, etc.), the unique challenges and the historic neglect of attention to mid-level staff suggest that particular planning and care should be given to these positions, including thinking carefully about the type of information conveyed, by whom, and in what form.

The following model, adapted from Duke University, a mid-size (13,000 enrollment), private university, offers a systematic approach for designing and implementing an effective orientation program for staff entering mid-level positions. It is recognized that each institution is unique and has its own nuances; thus, this model offers a framework for student affairs divisions to assess their own programs in place rather than offering a recipe of content and/or delivery methods to ensure a mid-level administrator's smooth transition. The four steps of this model are: 1) assess current university, division, and department practices; 2) identify desired outcomes; 3) develop an action plan; and 4) measure success. In developing a model, consideration should be given to windows of time for the information to be conveyed (pre-hire, pre-arrival, first six months, and ongoing) to foster the most effective transition (Mondy, 2008).

Assess current university, division, and department practices

One of the first steps necessary in building an effective mid-level position orientation program is examining what current practices exist, for all new employees, generally, and mid-level positions specifically. Is there a formal program in place beyond what may be offered by a central human resources office? Is information delivered in piece-meal fashion, or is there a systematic approach to the new hire's transition? Are orientation programs targeted at categories of employees (entry-level versus mid-level and higher, exempt versus non-exempt, etc.), or do all employees receive the same "canned" information? What are the responsibilities of the student affairs divisions, and what is more appropriate for a department within the division to address? Do informal orientation mechanisms exist and, if so, what quality control measures are in place to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of the information conveyed? What information is critical to a mid-level position yet may not be germane to entry-level staff?

Through the use of surveys, focus groups, and benchmarking of similar institutions' practices, colleges and universities can assess strengths and shortcomings of their training methods. Current staff members can offer perspective on their transition. It may be helpful to ask supervisors what aspects of their orientation programs they, in hindsight, would have conducted the same way, as well as differently, in training their new employees. The focus should be on the unique needs of mid-level managers and less on the acclimation of all employees new to the institution, although commonalties exist among groups.

In larger divisions, a committee of representatives from each unit within a student affairs division may be appointed to gather data on current practices and propose modifications, as well as new initiatives for a mid-level position orientation program. In smaller divisions, this can be a valuable project for all staff members. It is critical to have the support of key stakeholders in this review process. Minimally, department heads, mid-level administrators, and the chief student affairs officer should invest in the work of this committee. It is also helpful to have the support of the central human resources office and other university officials with whom the division interfaces (e.g., academic affairs, the president/chancellor, etc.). All have an interest in ensuring a quality training program for new staff, particularly as the prominence of a position increases.

Identify Desired Outcomes

After current methods of orienting mid-level professionals have been identified, the next step is to articulate desired orientation program outcomes. There are two levels of outcomes: personal learning goals of the new mid-level manager, and achievement of institutional aims. Learning outcomes may include awareness of institutional resources, performance expectations, history of the unit and its challenges and successes, university, division, and department culture, personnel issues, the budgetary process, strategic planning, etc. (Winston & Creamer, 1997). Attention should also be paid to the competencies and strategies highlighted in the preceding section: addressing transitions, managing ambiguity, fostering leadership, and other technical skill requirements such as financial management and assessment. Institutional goals may include increased productivity and efficiency, continuity between the former staff member and his/her replacement, stronger staff morale, higher job satisfaction, a reduction in turnover, a shorter learning curve, guarantee of minimal competencies, collaboration between departments, and efficient use of division resources. Measurable outcomes should be defined; the narrower the focus the easier to gauge the effectiveness of the program. Once these outcomes are generated, they should be compared with current practices. How well do they mesh? Do current practices need to be "tweaked," or is a complete overhaul necessary?

Develop an Action Plan

The third part of this process is to create an action plan—concrete steps that will be taken to implement an effective orientation program for mid-level staff, whether it be a re-design of current activities or a new set of initiatives. Considerable time and attention should be invested in this stage, for this is where the core content is developed. It is especially important at this stage to have the input and support of key personnel in a division/unit that may be called upon to assist in the orientation of the new staff member. Areas to address in developing the action plan include:

- Focusing on content areas specific to mid-level positions;
- Identifying the responsibilities of the college/university, the division, and the department for each outcome stated in the previous step;
- Setting expectations of supervisors/department heads in the process;
- Distinguishing between internal and external hires;
- Forecasting costs;
- Determining the delivery methods and by whom; and

- Setting up a system of checks and balances.

It is also important to consider the timing of each component of the orientation program. A natural demarcation of activities occurs at the following intervals: pre-hire, pre-arrival, first six months, and ongoing activities. At pre-hire (or recruitment), candidates should receive an accurate representation of the position and its place within the department/division. An overview of the "state of the institution" should be described. At pre-arrival, logistics should be the emphasis (getting the new employee on payroll, arranging office space, appointing a transition team, assigning a mentor, setting up introductory appointments, etc.). The first six months (which could be further broken down into the first two weeks, the first month, the first six weeks, etc.) should emphasize the core operational information and training necessary to achieve the desired outcomes identified previously. Ongoing information might be delivered via monthly professional development series for mid-level staff members who have entered the institution within the last year.

At Duke University, the action plan divided responsibility for orientation of mid-level personnel into three areas: that which was the responsibility of the department, that of the student affairs division, and duties assigned to a designated mentor. (The human resources office still had the responsibility of training staff on basic information—health plans, safety issues, federal requirements, etc.—that should be transmitted to all new employees). See Table 1 for an example of responsibilities of each of the three groups. The action plan called for a transition team of other mid-level managers to assist the new employee for a stated period of time. It also recommended that all mid-level employees develop a position folder outlining key responsibilities, constituencies the position interacted with, past problems and ways they were addressed, a timeline of critical events, and so on, with a cover transition memo from the previous employee. As a check and balance, the action plan called for each department to submit to the division's resource management office a summary checklist of completed steps to ensure that they have occurred as planned. A monthly "staff coffee" was initiated for all division employees to address topics that staff identified as areas in which they desired more knowledge/training (Nisbet et al., 1999).

Measure Success

Identifying assessment methods is the final step in this process. A systematic plan for review, including schedule and process, is important in order to gauge the success of the program. Both quantitative and qualitative measures are recommended. For instance, post-hire surveys regarding the amount, manner, and helpfulness of the information received before, during, and after the formal orientation process would be helpful along with a debriefing interview. A second follow-up assessment several months after the staff member has been in place is also critical in determining the accuracy of the information received as well as determining what information was immediately useful, had little salience, and/or was overlooked during the orientation process. Finally, a key indicator would be how quickly, smoothly, and comfortably a new mid-level manger was able to acclimate and become effective in their role as measured by self-report as well as observations from supervisors, direct reports, and other staff.

Summary

New employees in mid-level positions face unique challenges and transitions as they adjust to their roles. Sandwiched between entry-level and senior administrators, they may be forgotten as the former often receive a great amount of attention due to high turnover, and the latter similar amounts because of their prominence. The orientation of mid-level administrators should be an intentional, focused effort that deals with matters including life and work transition, role complexity, leadership demands, and technical skills requirements. By assessing current institution practices, identifying desired outcomes, developing an action plan, and measuring success, institutions can foster an effective orientation program to meet both institutional goals and needs of new employees in these positions.

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