

Maintaining an Ethical Balance in Student Orientation Programs

Bonita C. Jacobs
Marcia Hayes-Harris
Charles A. Lopez
Jeanine A. Ward

With increasing numbers of new student orientation programs as well as the level of administrative expectations of these programs, there are new ethical dilemmas which the orientation director often encounters. This article explores the balancing of ethics with conflicting goals for student orientation sources. Ethical standards related to the development and assessment of orientation programs, as well as specific issues unique to orientation are considered. In addition, models for ethical program planning and staff training are offered.

The number of orientation programs for students entering our colleges and universities has steadily increased over the last decade (Strumpf & Sharer, 1993b). Most institutions now have some sort of orientation for new students, and many of these programs are sophisticated in their approach to the academic, social, and developmental needs of students. As the number of programs has risen, there has also been an increase in accountability due to an enhanced understanding of the impact orientation has on retention efforts (Fox, Zakely, Morris, & Jundt, 1993).

Legal issues are in the forefront including substantial liability concerns. Orientation directors must also be concerned with ethical issues such as hiring and training student orientation leaders, confidentiality, fairness, and sexual harassment. Since orientation programs can, quite literally, affect whether students succeed at an institution and what that level of success will be, these overlapping legal and ethical concerns must be addressed. Orientation

circumvents departmental and divisional barriers and thus becomes an institution-wide endeavor where these issues require appropriate consideration.

There are several words which are at times used interchangeably with ethics," including standards, rules of conduct, morals, right and wrong, values, and honesty (Boatman, 1990). Ethical development is described as values education, moral development, and character education (Dalton, 1985). Brown (1989) describes an ethical campus climate as a place where questions are asked, action occurs, and power is not the primary focus. Ethics, according to Enarson (1984) has to do with integrity and whether we live by our own rules, even though rules of ethics are not usually included in job descriptions.

An ethical dilemma is a conflict in determining "an appropriate standard of conduct regarding obligations to two or more constituencies' (Hayman & Covert, 1986, p. 318). Ethical training programs might include topics such as conflict of interest, confidentiality, fair competition, proper accounting, relationships, and software piracy (Chadwick, 1994). Since orientation directors wear several "hats," ethical issues may come into play in such varying roles as supervisor, academic advisor, budget manager, public relations employee, information specialist, student association sponsor, administrator, and counselor.

Identifying what is *absolutely* wrong or *absolutely* right is relatively easy; however, ethics also has to do with what we commonly describe as gray areas (Boatman, 1990). Ethics rarely come in dramatic form and are most often encountered in our day-to-day routine. An ethical violation can be either a commission of an unethical behavior or the omission of information or assistance which would be helpful to others.

The complexity of ethics comes in the balancing of legal, ethical, and developmental concerns. Ethical theory, according to Haggard (1992), is concerned with both values (or self-interest) and morals (or obligations to others). Haggard states that "it would be appropriate then, to pursue some sort of balance, a balance which would include one's self-interest, without conflicting with moral obligations to others" (p.33). It is also important to distinguish between what is right or ethical and what is generally accepted or legally required. Because something is generally accepted does not guarantee it to be ethical (Jacobs, 1988), and being legal is not enough to warrant labeling a behavior as ethical.

Orientation professionals, like so many other student affairs professionals, are continually confronted with new tasks to perform and new goals to achieve. As a result, ethics are often overlooked in the overwhelming onslaught of day-to-day activities. However, understanding the principles of ethics and utilizing those concepts 'can make our jobs easier and less ambiguous. Not only will fewer conflicts develop with students and with other professional staff, but there will emerge a set of methods whereby decisions may be more consistently made." (Jacobs, 1988, p. 151)

Bonita C. Jacobs is Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Development at Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, North Carolina.

Marcia Hayes-Harris is Director of Orientation at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri.

Charles A. Lopez is Director of New Student Orientation at Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

Jeanine A. Ward is Director of Leadership Development and Orientation at Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina.

Standards for Ethical Behavior in Orientation

The Ethical Standards and Guidelines for Student Orientation Programs developed by the Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/ Development Programs (CAS, 1988) provides a framework for ethics in orientation. The CAS Standards are complementary to the ethical standards developed by a number of student personnel associations and outline the importance of confidentiality and the right to privacy, institutional policy and procedure, fairness and equal access to all students, avoidance of personal conflicts of interest, budget accountability, and avoidance of sexual harassment. Knowing one's limits of training and the importance of making referrals are also stressed, as well as ensuring that the institution is represented accurately in orientation publications and programs. The CAS Standards are straightforward; however, the difficult task comes in putting principles into practice.

There are a number of ethical dilemmas faced by orientation directors. Not only must orientation professionals realize what the ethical concerns are, they should also consider what might have been done prior to the situation and what can be done to resolve the dilemma. Consider the following scenarios which might create ethical conflicts for orientation directors and how they relate to the CAS Standards for Ethics:

1. A student tells the director that several orientation leaders were heard discussing new students' college entrance test scores and predicting success rates. One leader reportedly gave the name of a popular student who did not want to take classes during the lunch hour because he has an eating disorder. (Confidentiality and Right to Privacy)
2. During registration a premed student asks an orientation professional to review her schedule. She is working and taking 18 credits including biology, chemistry, and physics and her entrance test scores are marginal. She says this schedule looks difficult. The orientation professional knows that institutional protocol requires that each freshman premed major take this load, but feels that this schedule is not in the students best interest. (Institutional Policy and Fairness and Equal Access)
3. The orientation director's spouse owns a printing company and has agreed to provide a discount for orientation publications. The director knows that she can submit two small purchase orders to avoid sending the publications out for bid. (Conflict of Interest and Budget Accountability)
4. One of the student leaders is well liked by the other members of the staff but the comments on the daily evaluation mention that he is sometimes offensive. His humor is often borderline sexist or sexual, and many of his comments have double meanings. (Sexual Harassment)

The above examples illustrate the importance of putting standards into practice. A conscious effort should be made by student services personnel to frequently review and evaluate the policies, procedures, and practices of their programs as they relate to ethical issues, realizing that many of the issues may not always be easy to identify.

Guidance and training are key elements in maintaining appropriate ethical behavior. Careful self-analysis and frequent evaluation of student paraprofessionals, clerical staff, and colleagues is warranted (Corey & Corey, 1989). Student service professionals should be moving in a direction that increases a level of awareness and sensitivity to all situations involving ethical standards. Flagrant violations of ethical issues are easily recognized, but it is the more subtle, marginal infractions that occur on a daily basis that need close inspection.

Ethics in Program Development

The first step in developing an ethical environment in orientation is to model a high standard of ethics and to be sure one's actions and words are congruent to stated standards. Kitchener (1985) outlined five ethical principles which can be helpful when incorporated into one's style, training, and interaction with other staff and faculty. These principles as outlined by Kitchener are as follows:

1. **Respecting Autonomy.** This involves allowing others to have their own style and thoughts and might include hiring an orientation leader who may look at the world differently. Every orientation staff member does not have to speak about the institutional mission in the same way, as long as the message is consistent.
2. **Doing No Harm.** It is important to note that this includes both physical and psychological harm. Sometimes an off-handed comment to a parent or student that blemishes another staff person's or office's reputation can be as damaging as physical abuse.
3. **Benefiting Others.** The wellness of others should be important when planning programs. For example, are students given all the information needed for a successful transition? Is the program presented in such a way that students can retain what they need?
4. **Being just.** This includes giving every student the same opportunities to schedule classes and receive assistance, and also involves being accountable with finances.
5. **Being Faithful.** Orientation students and their parents need a full picture of the institution so they can make informed decisions. They need to be told what safety is really like on campus. Services available during orientation should also be available during the regular semester.

The second step in developing an ethical environment is to coordinate selection and comprehensive training programs for orientation staff which are consistent with ethical development and the needs of the program. The following are four methods of education as cited by Dalton, Barnett, and Healy (1982) that one can incorporate into training:

1. **Values Transmission** underscores the fact there are prescribed values society deems necessary for certain roles;
2. **Values Clarification** assists people to think rationally and to clarify their emotions in order to discover their own personal values (not a set of prescribed

values);

3. **Moral Development** stimulates the audience to think about moral issues, use their own reasoning and examine the implications of dilemmas. This method holds that certain values are "more preferable" in society;

4. **Moral Action** occurs when decisions are made due to the interdependence of internal and external forces.

The final step in creating an ethical environment in orientation programming is to build the actual program sessions utilizing ethical standards. A basic premise is that people (for the most part) know the difference between right and wrong but sometimes need clarification. One method of clarification is to utilize Blanchard and Peale's Ethics Check (1988), which is a series of three questions: First, *is it legal?*, not just by state and local laws, but within the institution's code of ethics? Is there a code of ethics in your program or at your institution? Secondly, *is it balanced?* Will the decision be fair and just for all, both now and in the future? Should an orientation director include someone in training who has something of value to say, even though he or she is a poor speaker or not well liked? Thirdly, *how will it make me feel about myself?* Would you want to read about this decision in the newspaper? Question one assists staff in looking at standards, question two relates to their level of fairness, and question three focuses on emotions and their own standards of morality.

Along with incorporating the Ethics Check, it is important for orientation directors to educate staff about obligations they have as members of the orientation team, including their commitment to the institution, the program, and those around them. Directors should support their staff and realize that it is difficult to make ethical decisions but even harder to implement those ethical choices (Blanchard & Peale, 1988).

The orientation professional has an obligation to incorporate the "Five P's of Ethics": purpose, pride, patience, persistence, and perspective (Blanchard & Peale, 1988). *Purpose* is defined as the ongoing meaning and definition to our lives or organizations. This might include assisting students and staff with the development of a purpose (i.e., to be a college student or a representative of the university), and explaining the institution's purpose, mission statement, or code of ethics. *Pride* is defined as assisting staff with the development of their self-esteem and instilling a sense of pride in and loyalty to their institution. *Patience* is defined as designing programs that build trust in each other and the process (Ducker & Ducker, 1994). Trusting the process and remaining ethical in one's actions will lead to long-term success. *Persistence* is defined as keeping at it. One has to commit to ethical behavior and remain consistent to actions and purpose. *Perspective* is defined as the capacity to see what is really important in any given situation. Being ethical means behaving ethically all the time, not just when it is convenient (Blanchard and Peale, 1988). To facilitate perspective, one should encourage staff to reflect on where they are, where they want to go, and how to get there through goal-setting activities while referring to the goals and the accomplishment process as well as the actual progress. Along with perspective, one should assist students in learning the knowledge of their own

limits and provide expectations of limits and resources for referral.

Competition for students has become stiffer (Blanchard & Peale, 1988), and it is even more important to be ethical at all times and not let the accomplishments of goals (retaining students) cloud one's ethics. Might one compromise the class scheduling process if it will retain students? If so, why have the process? As Schwarzmuller (1989) states, do not choose quick solutions if the end result is a lesser service for your constituents. After all, if one brings students to campus and offers them programs, services, and resources that will not later be available, they will not stay. Blanchard and Peale state it best, "If we have to cheat to win, then we'd better think about what we're doing" (1988, p. 29). One should continue to adhere to ethical beliefs and not be strayed by short term, quick-fix goals.

Program Assessment

As budgets continue to shrink, the struggle to adhere to ethical beliefs becomes more challenging orientation directors may be tempted by the short term, quick fixes because they may seem more economically desirable. Orientation directors, however, not only have the responsibility for monitoring compliance of their programs, but they must also have the ability to *effectively* assess what the constituents (students) need, to identify appropriate rewards and incentives for employees (student assistants), and to prioritize goals and objectives if they want to compete in today's educational marketplace. We are living in a time of customer satisfaction, employee incentives, and doing more with less - a time when collaboration and partnering seem to be valued more than individual initiative.

Until one can effectively ask the right questions, it will be difficult to accurately assess what needs to be done. Until one can effectively determine the appropriate motivations, it will be difficult to determine the appropriate incentives. Until one can effectively prioritize objectives, it will be difficult to select the most cost-efficient way to manage programs. The key to successfully managing any program is to perform an effective, ethical program assessment.

The CAS Self-Assessment Guide for Student Orientation Programs (1988) can assist an institution in determining its strengths, as well as identifying those areas which need improvement. Models by Lewin and Terenzini are two additional assessment options which might be considered (Mullendore & Biller' 1993). In order to select the most appropriate method of assessment, there are three areas that need to be addressed: (a) Determine which student development model is used as the standard within the student affairs division or seems most appropriate for the institution; (b) identify the goals of the student affairs division or program; and (c) understand how these goals relate to the mission of the institution.

Once orientation professionals have the information from this assessment, they can begin to develop and implement the program. CAS has identified 18 goals that are applicable to an orientation program regardless of the size or

objective of the institution. While statistics seem to indicate that there are relatively few who choose to use the CAS standards as a model for assessing their own programs (Strumpf & Sharer, 1993a), these same institutions affirm the 18 objectives cited in the guidelines as being necessary components for their programs. Whether or not a standardized assessment program such as the CAS Self-Assessment Guidelines is used, one must monitor the quality of the assessment and ensure that someone is responsible for assuring compliance.

"Whether for purposes of program development, accreditation self-study, staff development, program evaluation, or making comparisons across institutions, [CAS] standards and guidelines represent the most current thinking and considered judgment of those primarily responsible for the co-curricular life and educational experiences of college students" (Bryan and Mullendore, 1991, p. 31). Since the orientation professional is ultimately responsible for monitoring compliance of its program and justifying its existence, it seems apparent that the CAS model is the most viable option available for fulfilling this obligation. While it is noted that there are many models that may address individual areas of the orientation process, CAS offers a model that provides guidelines for monitoring compliance for all areas. 'These materials represent an excellent set of tools to develop, expand, explain, and defend important campus services' (Bryan & Mullendore, 1991, p. 30). Furthermore, 'systematic evaluation of an orientation program will provide constructive data to help staff members determine whether orientation activities accomplish their main purposes and will allow for participating departments and staff members to share in the ownership of the program' (Smith & Brackin, 1993, p. 40). Effective program assessment allows directors to identify customers' needs, determine staff motivators, and clarify goals and objectives.

Creating that sense of ownership and the spirit of collaboration is important in cultivating the ethical relationship. Involving staff, administration, and representatives in the evaluation and assessment processes will lead to better research and increase the chances that the information will actually be used (Oetting, 1980). In addition, the involvement opens the door for creating programs that are consistent and well-rounded because everyone shares in the vision, agrees upon the goals, and desires the same outcomes. When this "of relationship is cultivated, one can create opportunities for collaboration of services, funds, and resources, and for the ethical assessment of orientation programs.

Conclusion

Nash (1981) discussed questions which one should consider when dealing with ethical dilemmas. Revised below, the questions are as follows:

1. Have you defined the problem accurately?
2. How would you define the problem if you stood on the other side of the fence?
3. How and why did the situation occur in the first place?

4. To whom and to what do you give loyalty as a member of a community, group, or institution?
5. What is the intention in making this decision?
6. What are the probable results? Whom could the decision injure?
7. Can you discuss the problem with all parties involved before the decision is made?
8. What criteria will you use to make this decision?
9. Could you disclose without any reservation the decision or action to the newspaper?
10. What is the symbolic potential of the decision or action if understood by others? If misunderstood? (pp. 79-89)

As directors of orientation face more difficult and challenging roles and the presence of daily administrative challenges, ethical dilemmas are unavoidable. By earnestly asking questions, such as those above, and analyzing issues from an ethical standpoint, the orientation professional can respect autonomy, do no harm, benefit others, remain just, and remain faithful - all the ingredients for ethical behavior.

References

- Blanchard, K., & Peale, N. V. (1988). *The power of ethical management*. New York: Fawcett Crest.
- Boatman, S. A. (1990, March). Doing "what is right" in the campus activities field *Campus Activities Programming*, 22, 54-62.
- Brown, R. D. (1989). Someone has to ask the questions: Further discussion on ethics and the campus community. *ACPA Developments*, 18.
- Bryan, W. A., & Mullendore, R. H. (1991). Operationalizing CAS Standards for program evaluation and planning. *New Directions for Student Services*, No. 53. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chadwick, W. E. (1994). Promoting internal control and business ethics. *Business Officer*, 28(6), 20-22.
- Corey, M. S., & Corey, G. (1989). *Becoming a helper*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services /Developmental Programs (CAS) (1986). *CAS Standards and Guidelines for Student Services/Development Programs*. Washington DC: Author.
- Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Developmental Programs (CAS) (1988). *CAS standards and guidelines for student services/development programs: Student orientation programs self-assessment guide*. Washington, DC: Author'
- Dalton, J. C. (1985). Critical factors in the value development process. In J. C. Dalton (Ed.), *Promoting values development in college students* (NASPA Monograph Series, Vol. 4, pp. 47-61). Washington D C: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.
- Dalton, J. C., Barnett, D. C., & Healy, M. A., (1982). Educational approaches to value development in student development: A survey of NASPA chief

- student personnel administrators. *NASPA Journal*, 20,14-21.
- Ducker, M.W., & Ducker, D.L. (1994). Educating staff on ethics and professionalism. *Journal of College Student Development*, 35, 304-305.
- Enarson, H.L. (1984, Spring). The ethical imperative of the college presidency. *Educational Record*, 24-26.
- Fox, L., Zakely, J., Morris, R., & Jundt, M. (1993) Orientation as a catalyst: Effective retention through academic and social integration. In M.L. Upcraft, R.H. Mullendore, B.O. Barefoot, & D.S. Fidler (Eds.) *Designing successful transitions: A guide to orienting students to college*. (FYE Monograph Series, Number 13,49-60). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for The Freshmen Year Experience.
- Haggard, W.K. (1992). Campus acquaintance rape: An ethical analysis. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 12 (1), 32-39.
- Hayman, P.M., & Covert, J.A. (1986). Ethical dilemmas in college counseling centers. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 64 (January), 318-320.
- Jacobs, B. (1988). Beyond policy. Ethical considerations in student development. In G.A. Antonelli, B.A. Mann, E.E. Meyer, Jr., T.H. Stafford, Jr., G.W. Stillion, L.S. White, & H.L. Wilson, Jr. (Eds.), *Student services: Responding to issues and challenges. The fifth compendium of papers by student services officers of the University of North Carolina* (pp. 145-152). Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina General Administration.
- Kitchener, K.S. (1985). Ethical principles and ethical decisions in student affairs. In H.J. Cannon & R.D. Brown (Eds.), *Applied ethics in student services*. New Directions for Student Services, No. 30. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mullendore, R.H., & Biller, G.M. (1993). Orientation standards, evaluation, and assessment. In M.L. Upcraft, R.H. Mullendore, B.O. Barefoot, & D.S. Fidler (Eds.) *Designing successful transitions: A guide to orienting students to college*. (FYE Monograph Series, Number 13, pp. 169-182). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for The Freshmen Year Experience.
- Nash, L. (1981). Ethics without the sermon. *Harvard Business Review*, 79-89.
- Oetting, E.R. (1980). *A guide to program evaluation: Dimensions of intervention for student development*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Schwarzmueller, G.J. (1989). Ethical standards for the housing professional: A model for behavior. *Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 19(1),3-6.
- Smith, B., & Brackin, R. (1993). Components of a comprehensive orientation program. In M.L. Upcraft, R.H. Mullendore, B.O. Barefoot, & D.S. Fidler (Eds.) *Designing successful transitions: A guide to orienting students to college*. (FYE Monograph Series, Number 13, pp. 35-48). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for The Freshmen Year Experience.
- Strumpf, G., & Sharer, G. (1993a). *NODA Data Bank*. College Park, MD: The National Orientation Directors Association.
- Strumpf, G., & Sharer, G. (1993b). Trends and issues in orientation programs. M.L. Upcraft, R.H. Mullendore, B.O. Barefoot, and D.S. Fidler (Eds.).

Designing successful transitions: A guide to orienting students to College. (FYE Monograph Series, Number 13, pp. 27-34). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for The Freshmen Year Experience.