

**NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION: ALIGNING MULTIGENERATIONAL COMMONALITIES
FOR STUDENT SUCCESS**

Melanie V. Tucker

Maryville College

melanie.tucker@maryvillecollege.edu

Brian O. Hemphill

Radford University

brianhemphill12@gmail.com

Abstract

As post-secondary campus communities strive to positively impact student success, new student orientation programs provide an opportunity to build community and campus capacity for shifting the needle on retention efforts through a multigenerational lens. Post-secondary undergraduate students in the United States notably represent Generations X, Y, and Z. Families of contemporary college students also reflect myriad generations.

Successful new student orientation programs set the stage for academic success, foster students feeling valued and included, and connect students with the campus community.

Aligning multigenerational commonalities of new students through orientation programs may strengthen student success efforts through the first year and beyond.

Keywords: student success, new student orientation, multigenerational, retention, Generation Z, post-traditional

Introduction

As post-secondary campus communities strive to positively impact student success, new student orientation programs provide an opportunity to build community and campus capacity for shifting the needle on retention efforts through a multigenerational lens. In the fall of 2015, nearly 20 million students enrolled in post-secondary institutions in the United States: 11.8 million students under the age of 25 and 8.1 million students age 25 or older (National Center for Education Statistics). Of these students, 17 million (85%) enrolled in undergraduate programs. These students represent, respectively, traditional students – those most often entering college directly after graduating high school – and post-traditional students – those entering college in a later phase of life when they are more likely to be financially independent, have dependents, seeking a second career, or have military experience.

Contemporary college students represent Generations X, Y, and Z. Families of contemporary college students also reflect multiple generations. Effectively including students and their families in new student orientation programs is integral to student success. So, how may post-secondary institutions utilize new student orientation to set the stage for student success with a multigenerational audience?

Students persist at institutions of higher education where they feel a sense of belonging, where they feel valued and included (Museus, S.D., Yi, V., & Saelua, N., 2017; Strayhorn, T.L., 2012; Tinto, V., 2017). Comprehensive new student orientation programs strive to lay the foundation for fulfilling such feelings through the various components of programming utilized. Effective orientation programs connect new students with the

campus community (Tinto, 1990), while also setting students on a course for success, both academically (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005; Talbert, 2012) and holistically (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Through spotlighting the commonalities of new students across generations, while also creating spaces for individualized components, new student orientation programs strengthen the foundation for student success at post-secondary institutions and further foster a sense of community across student cohorts.

Multiple Generations

The audience for new student orientation programs includes students and, often, their families. Families in this context may include grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, guardians, partners, spouses, and children – spanning from Baby Boomers to Generation Z. Generations, as constructs, are a set of loose categories lacking concrete boundaries for when one generation clearly begins and another distinctly ends (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010). Generational constructs ebb and flow as generations break from younger generations, react and respond to perceived extremes of other generations, and fill the voids remaining from older generations (Howe & Strauss, 2003). Additionally, multiple approaches to understanding generations exist (Biggs, 2007; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Coomes and DeBard (2004) state each “generation is shaped by its interactions with other extant generations” (p. 8). As such, higher education practitioners benefit from integrating perceived intergenerational conflicts into addressing the needs of individual students and broader student cohorts.

For this article, a generation is a multifaceted construct reflective of individuals' understanding of belonging to an age-defined cohort. Within each cohort are assumed traits and characteristics which speak to actions, such as planning and programming for new student orientation, but do not represent or hold true for every generational member. Higher education administrators must be mindful to not blatantly attribute all generational characteristics to all individual students. Seemiller and Grace (2016) state "generations, much like cultures, have their own attitudes, beliefs, social norms, and behaviors that define them" (p. 1).

Terms such as Baby Boomer, Gen X, and Millennial appear frequently in literature (Beutell & Witting-Berman, 2008; Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Larkin, 2017; Loveland, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016) with assumed, general understanding of the chronological cohort each term represents. However, the age range of each generation varies depending on the author. For example, Seemiller and Grace (2016) describe Baby Boomers as individuals born between 1946 and 1964, while Coomes & DeBard (2004) describe Baby Boomers as individuals born between 1943 and 1960. This article uses the following definition of generational cohorts:

- Baby Boomers, early 1940s to early 1960s;
- Generation X, early 1960s to early 1980s;
- Generation Y/Millennials, early 1980s to late 1990s;
- And, Generation Z, late 1990s to 2010. Generation Z are the traditional students presently entering into post-secondary institutions.

Baby Boomers

Members of the Baby Boomer generation grew up attributing success to hard work. Tenacity, ambition, and drive define many Baby Boomers. Descriptors of Baby Boomers include individualistic, skeptical, pessimistic, and self-absorbed, while also focused on social causes (Beutell & Witting-Berman, 2008), which reflects the impact of social experiences during formative years of Baby Boomers (e.g., Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movement, Women's Movement).

Generation X

Generation X experienced an increase in households where both parents worked and became known as latchkey kids with early independence (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Generation X experienced the first personal computers, video games, and cable television. Gen Xers are described as appreciating teamwork, seeking understanding of how actions affect others, desiring work-life balance, and having a heightened sense of customer service. Gen Xers are also defined as lacking a coherent generational identity (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The lack of cohesive identity reflects the impact of worldwide events like the fall of the Berlin Wall, AIDS, the crash of the US stock market, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, and the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle.

Generation Y

Generation Y is often referred to as the Millennials and as the Me Generation. The Me generation is described as entitled, confident, engaged, and involved. Also, Millennials generally have an appreciation for teamwork and a strong connection with their families – emotionally and financially. Generation Y reflects the values of their families, where one in five have immigrant parents, and more racial and ethnic diversity than previous

generations (Oblinger, 2003.) According to Raphelson (2014), Millennials are on track to become the most educated generation thus far. This is also the first generation to grow up within a multimedia and interactive environment. Millennials are used to 24/7 technology connectivity.

Generation Z

Generation Z includes traditional-aged students presently entering into post-secondary institutions. Generation Z is sometimes referred to as the We Generation. Generation Z looks to their peers more often than their families for input (Loveland, 2017), for a variety of life decisions. Members of Generation Z are also referred to as mobile natives, reflecting the role the Internet has in shaping their lives. Generation Z is described as dedicated, compassionate, thoughtful, open-minded, accountable, and determined. Experiencing life after the 9/11 terrorist attack led Generation Z to embrace entrepreneurship, and a desire to advocate on behalf of and work toward addressing things they strongly believe in. Seemiller and Grace (2016) indicate members of Generation Z identify education, employment, and racial equality as their greatest concerns and express a disinterest in politics (and politicians) as a reflection of dysfunction taking away from progress and positive change.

Inclusive New Student Orientation

A multigenerational perspective provides higher education administrators with another tool for understanding students and shaping programs toward student success. Historical events and anchors impact and shape generations (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 2008). Anchors are the shared experiences within generations, which shape attitudes and

beliefs (Oblinger, 2003). Higher education administrators can use a multigenerational perspective to shape student success initiatives, while also respecting and honoring the individuality of students across campus and in various cohorts. Despite some individuals not fitting clearly within generational characterizations, an understanding of each generation may help higher education professionals striving to impact student success.

New student orientations designed to support student success typically include the following components: introducing a pervasive learning environment; facilitating placement and proficiency testing; completing academic advising and course registration; modeling campus culture, values, and traditions; welcoming participants, including opportunities to meet other students, faculty, and staff; and, assuring students of their rights and responsibilities (National Association for Orientation, Transition, Retention in Higher Education 2014). The mix of generations now participating in new student orientation requires thoughtful planning and sharing of information. Finding a way to speak to the needs of students across generations, quickly and effectively, is integral to successful new student programming.

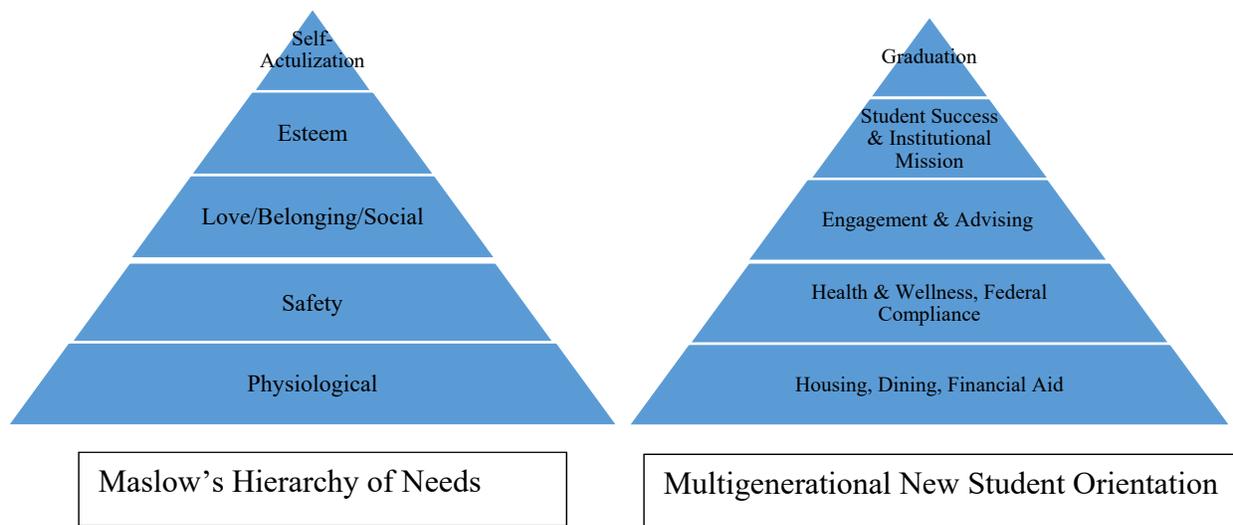
Family and Parent Involvement with Orientation

Meeting the needs of families through orientation requires a sensitivity to time while addressing questions and concerns early and often. First-generation college students make a choice to be “unlike their parents” (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2018, p. 79). Though the choice is often supported, such a choice fosters questions and concerns about the students’ future. Embarking as the first in one’s family to pursue post-secondary education introduces anxiety, a change in family “norms,” and tension, which is sometimes

challenging for families to navigate. Students entering post-secondary institutions from family with previous post-secondary educational experience typically face less ambiguity regarding the process. However, these students and their families benefit from a sense of belonging within the campus community, just as first-generation families do; family support and appropriate involvement is associated with student success (Mailhot & Feeney, 2017).

More families are taking out loans on behalf of their college students (Zumeta & Hunt, 2012). As such, families want a sense of satisfaction with their investment (Levine & Dean, 2012). Seemiller and Grace (2016) assert the importance of understanding parents' extreme influence in the college experience and become, in essence, institutional stakeholders with an impact on student success.

To meet family needs as a component of new student orientation, Mullendore (2014) proposes using Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, which reflects meeting needs in the following order: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Within new student orientation, meeting Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs may look like the following: housing, food, and financial aid; health, wellness, federal compliance, and alcohol and other drug prevention; engagement and advising; individualized success and institutional mission; and, graduation. Additionally, Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs and human motivation are often tied together (Petty, 2014), as concepts such as motivation and grit are associated with student success.



Aligning Commonalities for Student Success

In using a multigenerational approach reflecting Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, new student orientation programs may seek to address content in the following order. First, speak to physiological needs such as housing, dining, and financial aid. Second, address safety needs such as health, wellness, campus security, parking, and federal compliance matters. Third, exemplify how the campus community creates a sense of belonging, being loved, and valued through such aspects as academic advising and advisors, clubs, organizations, social societies, and athletics. Fourth, identify how self-esteem components as associated with the mission, vision, core values, culture, history, and traditions of the institution are embraced and modeled. Fifth, evidence how self-actualization is demonstrated through graduation.

The prevalent, assumed commonality across all new post-secondary students, regardless of generation, is a desire to earn a degree. Beyond academic success, achievement outside of the classroom and a sense of belonging translate to student persistence, positively shaping student success (Herman, J., & Hilton, M., 2017). New

student orientation programs are a tool used by institutions of higher education to help strengthen the foundation for student success.

New student orientation programs set the stage for student involvement throughout the college experience and are an integral component of student success. Much of the literature addressing new student orientation ties to traditionally aged students entering post-secondary institutions for the first time. However, with the increase in post-traditional students seeking college degrees, and the associated multigenerational representation of entering cohorts, seeking to align new student orientation programs to speak to various generational cohorts may further foster broad support for student success.

Various components, external and internal, make up successful new student orientation programs. Often, new student orientation programs include an overview of the post-secondary institution, associated culture and values, and the academic experience. In addition to the earlier referenced components, such as course placement, academic advising, and learning opportunities outside of the classroom, salient issues such as campus life, housing and dining, commuter options, athletics, and support services, usually have a place within new student orientation as well (National Orientation Directors Association, 2014).

Such an approach provides opportunities to speak to students and families, from various generations, in salient ways. For example, Larkin (2017) references messages targeting post-traditional students, also the generation of many families of traditionally aged/Generation Z students, speaks to Gen Z students as well. Members of Generation Z

and Generation X attend college with a focus on degree completion tied to career opportunities (Larkin, 2017). As such, Generation Z and their families may positively respond to a focus on college as career training opportunities beyond the classroom.

Generation Z is also financially conservative (Larkin, 2017). Having watched the stock market crash, Generation Z students are anxious about student debt. Being transparent about cost of attendance will likely receive a favorable response from Generation Z and their families, as will explicitly sharing success stories of alumni reflecting career achievement upon graduation. Multiple generations desire a direct correlation between classroom experiences and workplace success (Larkin, 2017; Loveland, 2017). Highlighting opportunities such as building a portfolio, year-to-year career laddering programs, and mentorships with alumni, all speak to multiple generations. What else can higher education administrators do to infuse a multigenerational approach into new student orientation programs?

Communication

Communicating the importance of new student orientation is essential to the success of such programs. As such, higher education administrators should review communication related to new student orientation programs from a multigenerational lens. It is salient to consider how information is communicated along with what is communicated.

Millennials and Generation Z hold an expectation of finding instant answers online (Loveland, 2017). Facebook became the preferred platform for Millennials (Loveland, 2017). Presently, Generation Z is more attuned to platforms such as Instagram (Loveland,

2017) and Snapchat. A key take-away is that social media is consistently changing. Institutions seeking to speak to multiple generations will benefit from using multiple social media platforms.

The rapid pace at which social media preferences change also applies to formats such as email and text. Seemiller and Grace (2016) assert email is one of the least preferred forms of communication for Generation Z, whereas it remains a preferred form of communication for higher education practitioners. There is no one right way to communicate across generations; rather, it behooves post-secondary institutions to implement a multi-modal communication approach. Instead of looking at what is perhaps easiest or quickest, consider the recipients of targeted messages and select one or more communication vehicles effective for the intended audience.

Consider, for example, how incoming students receive information about new student orientation. If the communication meant to call students to action is delivered via email, are students reading it in timely manner? Are students sharing the invitation with their families? If communication calling students to action is delivered via hard copy, is it in an envelope addressed to the student or on a postcard, which any family member could read?

Communication intended to reach multiple generations should not be an either/or experience; meaning, communication should speak to or call to action students of various generations. For example, print materials should visually reflect various student populations. Language should resonate with traditional and post-traditional students. This

may result in using various communication tools, as well as drafting different messages depending on intended audience (and generation).

Communication related to new student orientation is a two-way street. Post-secondary institutions may benefit from multi-modal approaches to reaching students, and new students may benefit from experiencing and engaging with appropriate and professional communication. Students may enter into post-secondary settings with limited experience of communicating with school personnel. Students may not understand which communication is official, such as email attached to an “edu” address. Conversely, students may not understand that sharing information in one location, say within residence life, does not automatically mean every department across campus is aware of such information.

Both the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and the Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education (NODA) endorse orientation as a collective, comprehensive process versus a one-time event. Such a process might include a one-day summer registration event, a week of welcome, and a semester long first-year seminar. In this scenario, there are multiple opportunities for new students to learn about communicating within and navigating across the post-secondary setting. Admissions and Orientation staff may demonstrate appropriate in-person and online forms of communication through registration processes and programming. Student Affairs staff and peer mentors may speak to the nuances on-campus and how best to communicate in-person and in writing when navigating campus expectations and policies. Faculty may exemplify clear communication in the classroom.

Motivation

Communication may find increased success if it speaks to the various components of generational motivation for seeking a post-secondary degree. For example, Loveland (2017) asserts that the rising cost of college contributes to Generation Z making more prudent financial choices, and that it informs decisions regarding institutions of first choice for some Generation Z students. As a result, Generation Z students and their families increasingly seek information about student loan debt, average default rates, and typical starting salary range of graduates sooner, and they do so more often than previous generations.

Transparency regarding cost of attendance, along with associated financial aid, matters to students and their families across generations, as does ability to persist toward a degree. Multiple generations of students and families respond to factors regarding earning a degree, such as opportunities for credit from prior learning, Advanced Placement courses, and high school dual credit. Additionally, information such as institutional loan default rates, average indebtedness, and average starting salary (Loveland, 2017) speaks to multiple generations. As such, higher education administrators may wish to include financial savvy components into new student orientation. Spotlighting financial literacy programming and salary negotiation workshops, for example, indicates to multiple generations an institution's commitment to educating students early on about prudent financial management.

However, other than cost of education, generations are motivated by different concerns. Baby Boomer parents trusted post-secondary institutions to take care of their

students, and they assumed a degree would guarantee a successful career and stable financial income. More recently, Generation X parents are less trusting of post-secondary institutions' capacity to take care of students (Loveland, 2017). Contemporary families are now increasingly interested in how institutions support student success outside of the classroom. Addressing support for student success in new student orientation is meaningful across generations. What this support looks like, however, may vary across generations. This further exemplifies how using Maslow's hierarchy to frame new student orientation may be helpful.

Career Training

A consistent motivation for earning a post-secondary degree is the ability of graduates to build a career post-graduation. Larkin (2017) asserts that Generation Z's number one factor in selecting a post-secondary institution is support for career preparation. Oblinger (2003) notes that contemporary college students believe "results and actions are considered more important than the accumulation of facts" (p. 40). While this may be an unsettling concept for higher education administrators, new student orientation is an ideal time to address the value of learning *and* doing.

Post-secondary institutions may highlight opportunities to learn outside of the classroom, such as through laboratory experiences, collaborations with community agencies, internships, mentoring programs, and job shadowing. Additionally, institutions may spotlight successful alumni and how specific degrees translate to careers. According to Seemiller and Grace (2016), a hallmark of Generation Z is entrepreneurialism. New student orientation is an ideal time to include entrepreneurial student successes, associated clubs

and organizations, and ways in which the institution support students' individual aspirations.

Presentation of Information within New Student Orientation

Presentation and style are just as important as the messages and content provided. Combining generational understanding with contemporary learning theories may result in presentations that actively engage new student orientation participants throughout their in-person experience. Structure, such as the previously referenced cross-generational hierarchy of needs, allows higher education administrators a format onto which various learning styles and values may be incorporated to further involve new students and their families.

Holyoke and Larson (2009) provide suggestions on how to actively engage learners across generations. Higher education administrators may consider applying Holyoke and Larson's (2009) suggestions in the following ways for impact across multiple generations:

1. Provide opportunities for participants to connect with other participants.

Generation X and Generation Z will likely prefer personal connections, Millennials likely will prefer hands-on experiences, and Baby Boomers will likely appreciate cognitive connections to personal experiences.

2. Provide opportunities for participants to apply content to their forthcoming campus experience. Even though new student orientation is typically a group experience, multigenerational participants appreciate individualized and personalized interactions.

3. Provide opportunities for small and large group dialogue. Across generations, trust and comfort are more readily developed in smaller groups, which then allow a deeper connection to and engagement with larger group conversations. Sessions within new student orientation for various student populations (e.g. military-connected, commuters vs. residential) will likely further such efforts.

Additionally, incorporate technology effectively and efficiently. For example, advising and course registration is often an integral component of new student orientation. Are new students able to get online, with their families if they choose, to explore courses and academic options prior to attending orientation? Are leaders of new student orientation speaking to the audience, or are they providing interactive opportunities for participants? Are there various opportunities to ask questions, receive information, and engage students and families together and apart? While there is no one “right” way to share essential information, using a multimodal and interactive approach allows participants of various generations to find their fit and comfort.

Conclusion

New student orientation programs provide a foundation upon which post-secondary institutions may positively impact student success. With a multigenerational student body seeking post-secondary degrees across the country, supported by multigenerational families, institutions of higher education may benefit from aligning commonalities across new students during new student orientation programming, as this may strengthen new students’ sense of belonging and feelings of values and inclusion.

Aligning commonalities requires higher education administrators to identify salient components of new student orientation in which a multigenerational approach applies.

The order in which information is presented within new student orientation may enhance multigenerational engagement. Mullendore (2014) proposes applying Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs to the orientation process to identify a salient order in which to share content with new student orientation participants. How information is provided may also positively shape the engagement of participants across generations. Fostering connections between participants, applying content to campus experiences, and providing small and large group experiences speak to various generations of learning according to Holyoke and Larson (2009). Further, using a multimodal approach allows participants of multiple generations to find a preferred and comfortable way to engage.

Within the new student orientation experience, commonalities impacting student success exist across multiple generations. Factors such as student motivation, opportunities for career training, and financial conservatism speak to multigenerational students and their families. Higher education administrators may find value added in strengthening cohorts of new students through aligning such commonalities.

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