Start at the very beginning: Engaging Students in Orientation Week Activities.

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Abstract

The 2006 cohort of commencing students in the School of Science and Engineering at the University of Ballarat was treated to a comprehensive Orientation Week Program, running from 9.00 to 5.00 each day for 5 days. Attendance rates were significantly higher than in previous years where the O Week program offered less emphasis on engagement with School personnel and student Mentors. Analysis of staff, first year student and Mentor surveys all support the more substantial program and its increased relevance to beginning students.

The University of Ballarat is a regional institution servicing student populations drawn mainly from the Ballarat environs and rural communities in northern and western Victoria. Within a 2-hour radius of the central UB campus are several other large Universities including Deakin, Melbourne, Monash, Victoria, RMIT, Swinburne and LaTrobe.

The School of Science and Engineering is the smallest of eight Schools at UB with an annual intake of approximately 60 students into each of the undergraduate engineering and science programs. The Central Highlands Wimmera Education Region from which this institution draws the majority of its students has a particular profile which makes the attraction, engagement and retention of students a major priority. Of all regions in Victoria, CHW has the lowest progression of students into post-compulsory education in general, applications for university places are well below the state average and rejection of offers from tertiary institutions is higher than average. (University of Melbourne Centre for Post Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, unpublished)

With low progression rates into tertiary education and a large number of universities in close proximity, competition for student enrolments in our region is high. Unemployment rates in the region are slightly higher than the state average and many students face difficulties in that they are often the first generation in their family to attend university, and face a variety of economic and social difficulties. The need to engage students early in their transition to university is self evident.

In 2004, the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and Research) established a Transition Reference Group with aims of improving the quality of social and learning experiences for all students enrolled in first year at UB, and having a positive impact on student attrition rates. The resulting multi-faceted Transition Program is centrally supported and coordinated across all Schools; however within each School a degree of autonomy and flexibility in organisation and delivery of programs is accommodated.

Strategies adopted by the Transition Reference Group include the appointment of specific personnel within each school whose role is to coordinate the Schools’ Transition Program.

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Another significant initiative has been the introduction of a Mentor Program whereby older students apply for, are selected and then paid to take on leadership roles during Orientation Week and the first six weeks of semester.

In recognition of the importance of Orientation Week in the transition process, and as part of the expanded Transition Program, The School of Science and Engineering conducted an informal review of its O Week Program. In February 2005 the School ran an O Week program which was significantly different in several respects from those offered previously. Student and staff feedback was evaluated and used to make further changes to the program in 2006.

The School of Science and Engineering O Week 06 timetable ran for 5 days from 9.15 am – 4.45pm. It was built around activities run by the Student Association, sessions offered centrally by Student Services, and in coordination with other Schools in which significant numbers of our students are enrolled. School-based activities included specific course information, lab and tute sign-up sessions, library orientation, computer network and information literacy sessions, a variety of School-based social events, and a number of study skills sessions. One day was offered as “O Week in a day” and was targeted at mature-age and international postgraduate students.

In preparation for O Week, staff were asked to provide input into the content of sessions. Session Information Sheets were then disseminated to the appropriate staff members in the week prior to O week. These Information Sheets contained detail such as venue, allocated Mentors, expected attendance numbers and notes on suggested topics to be covered and/or activities to run. Anecdotal feedback indicates that staff and Mentors found these extremely useful. The sheets provided a framework around which sessions could be based whilst still allowing staff and Mentors the flexibility to individually tailor the session to their liking. All Session Information Sheets were made available to all staff via the internal network, allowing anyone to check the content of any session.

Extensive surveying of first year students, Mentors and staff involved in O Week 06 has been conducted and the results of these findings will be presented at this session. The expanded O Week program has been well received by students with attendance levels being very high (conservatively 71% of enrolments on day one), remaining at approximately 50% for the next two days and finishing at 38% on Friday. On every day except one - “O week in a day” - attendance exceeded expectations which had been based on attendance rates in previous years. First Year students rated most sessions run by the School as either a 4 or 5 on a “usefulness” scale ranging from 1(low) – 5 (high).

We interpret these high and sustained attendance figures with a feeling amongst beginning students that the sessions they were attending were of genuine use in preparing them for many social and academic aspects of university life. Survey responses indicate the vast majority of O Week attendees felt far more comfortable about beginning the semester than they had prior to O Week, knew their Mentor and several staff and intended on participating in the voluntary Mentor Program during the next 6 weeks.
Mentors played a key role in running many of the O week sessions, and their own evaluations of their contributions indicate strong support for the concept of a busy and engaging week.

At the end of Week 2 of the Semester 1 teaching period, student attendance at weekly meetings with Mentors has been approximately 50%, comparing favourably with less than 25% in 2005 when Mentor involvement was not a significant factor in O Week organisation. First year students have obviously engaged with and formed relationships with their Mentors through attendance at O Week.

Detailed analysis of student surveys conducted on the first day of lectures in semester 1 has not yet been finalised, but we expect that they will give us a clear view of the geographic source of our students, their educational history and their level of engagement in Orientation Week and the Mentor program. These results will be available by the conference date and will be presented to session participants. Anecdotal evidence, attendance figures and a crude examination of the survey results leads us to believe that we have offered our commencing students a program which they find valuable and for which they are willing to make sacrifices in other areas of their lives in order to attend. We aim to continually monitor and refine the program over the coming years so that students can be confident that their attendance at O week will benefit their academic and social start at university.

Discussion topics

Is it reasonable to expect students to give up a week of their time prior to beginning the formal teaching time at university?

What benefits do students perceive they will derive from attending O Week and do we cater to their expectations?

What type of student is most/least likely to attend Orientation Week and how can we increase and then maintain attendance rates during the week?

Apart from making O Week more academically relevant, how can we further engage beginning students in Orientation programs?

References