

New Student Orientation, Division of Undergraduate Academic Programs

Fall 2005 Transfer Focus Group Executive Report

INTRODUCTION

The mission of New Student Orientation (NSO) is to provide newly admitted first year and transfer undergraduate students introductory assistance and continuing services that will aid in their transition to NC State, expose them to broad educational opportunities, and integrate them into the life of the institution.

Each year, NSO provides transfer students an opportunity to complete an online evaluation form to rate the services provided by academic and student services during Orientation. In addition to the online survey, NSO provided transfer students the opportunity to participate in a focus group to provide detailed information about their experiences at NC State. Approximately two and a half months after the start of the fall 2005 semester, NSO conducted three focus groups with students who transferred to NC State University.

Discussion with the students captured some of the unique needs of the transfer student population, especially concerning their admission and transfer process, social integration and connectedness, academic advising, and orientation experience. Since the student's comments cannot be generalized to all transfer students based on the small number of students who participated in the focus group, New Student Orientation intends to use the students' comments as a basis for further exploration for improvement of the transfer student programs.

JUSTIFICATION FOR FOCUS GROUP

New Student Orientation is committed to providing quality services to all new incoming undergraduates at NC State. Twenty-five percent of graduates of NC State were at one time transfer students. NSO recognizes the importance of these students to the campus community and allocates resources and personnel to evaluate and assess the services provided for these students. The purpose of the focus group is to receive feedback from transfer students about their experiences transferring to NC State University.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants

The age of the participants ranged from nineteen to fifty-two, and varied in race and gender. Each participant brought unique experiences to the discussion such as non-traditional student, community college transfer, married with children, and military family to name a few.

Format

An invitation to participate in a focus group was sent to 1,060 new transfer students via email on October 19, 2005. Although nineteen students signed up to attend the focus groups only four students actually participated in the discussion.

Time and Cost

This focus group was conducted over a two-week period. Students were required to dedicate one hour of their time to participate in the group. Facilitators used this time to ask questions and collect data from the students. Approximately \$30 was used to provide refreshments for the students and lanyards, water bottles, and ice cream coupons were distributed as gifts for their participation.

Confidentiality

Students were asked to sign a confidentiality form that stated that their participation was voluntary and that the information collected would only be used to evaluate and provide recommendations for improvements to future programs. All participants agreed to have their conversation audio recorded.

QUESTIONS

Questions were developed to guide the conversation with the students. Below is an outline of the categories and questions.

Admissions and Transfer Credit Process

1. Why did you choose NC State?
2. What were your expectations before you arrived at NC State and in what way have your expectations changed or remained the same?

Orientation

3. What do you remember about Transfer Orientation?
4. What did you like about Transfer Orientation?
5. What suggestions for improvement would you recommend?

Advising and College Connection

6. How has your advising experience been at NC State University? (before, during and after orientation)
7. Did you participate in any college sponsored events or activities during the first weeks of classes?

Social Integration and Connectedness

8. What systems of support were you aware of when you first came to campus? (academic questions, personal concerns, social activities, practical issues)
9. Was it easy for you to make friends and meet other students? (why or why not)
10. What activities or student organizations are you currently involved in outside of class?
11. How did you hear about these student groups and organizations?
12. What types of activities and programs do you think would improve the transfer student process? (connecting students to the University)

If time permits

13. What other information or suggestions would you want university administrators to know about your experience transferring and/or adjusting to NC State University?

RESULTS

The participants had diverse backgrounds and each shared their experience during the transfer process. There were several themes that emerged during the discussion.

Academic Advising during Transfer Orientation

Students who attend New Student Orientation have an opportunity to meet with their college or departmental representatives to receive advising assistance. Students also have the opportunity to register for their classes while they are on campus or they may choose to register when they return home. It was evident that there was some frustration from students that the transfer credit process was not readily available or that advisers were not able to provide them with clear messages of which courses would transfer and count towards graduation.

The experiences of the students varied, but it was evident that the students wished their advising experience had been more personable and done on an individual basis. A concern was also expressed that messages had been given to students by departmental representatives and current students that conflicted with New Student Orientation's requests and requirements. These messages included attendance at Orientation, receiving academic assistance and timing of class registration. These contrary messages confused the students and left them with some uncertainty of what they should do.

Academic Advising once Semester Began

Participants were asked how their relationship with their academic adviser has transpired over the first few months of the semester.

Some of the students were satisfied that they had the same adviser in the Summer and Fall semesters, but others expressed that they did not know who their adviser was and therefore had to seek out these individuals. Positive comments indicated that some advisers played an active role in the advising relationship, and made suggestions to the students based on their discussions. Other comments indicated that students received accurate information but wanted their advisers to be more personable.

Social Integration and Connectedness

A consistent theme from participants was that they had difficulty with social integration issues, particularly meeting other students and getting involved in various campus activities. Those students who lived off campus found it hard to meet other students and therefore did not feel connected to campus. Living on campus

continues to play a major role as students attempt to develop friendships, get involved and seek out leadership opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants of the focus group provided specific recommendations to New Student Orientation and identified what the University could do better to serve the needs of transfer students.

Recommendations for Transfer Student Programs

- Make information about transfer credits readily available online and in print for students to review before they transfer to NC State.
- Train academic advisers not only to provide advising assistance, but also to take the time to get to know the students.
- Make sure advisers are aware of and sensitive to non-traditional students and their unique needs.
- Provide campus tours that focus less on residence halls and more on areas or places for commuter students. This should include study areas, academic buildings, computer labs, parking, and the library. Consider giving tours that are college specific and make sure students have an opportunity to get acquainted with each other.
- Make sure campus representatives are aware of New Student Orientation messages and requirements so they do not send conflicting information.
- Include the Financial Aid, Registration and Records and Veteran's Affairs offices in the campus tour.
- Provide bus information to participants that include bus routes, bus stops and transportation options.
- Provide an Information Fair that is more specialized for transfer students
- Inform Orientation Counselors during training about the characteristics of various student populations, such as transfer, community college, and nontraditional students and make sure they are involved in the program.

Recommendations for Future Focus Groups

- Offer focus groups earlier in the semester (such as in early to middle October)
- Give students approximately two-to-three weeks notice of focus group so that they can plan accordingly. Email reminders or call participants to remind about sessions.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the students indicated they felt as though they were adjusting to college, but still faced some challenges. They have been able to receive assistance from various office and departments on campus to help them with their transition to NC State University.

The number of students that participated in the focus group was very small, however they provided information that will help to shape future programs. Those things that represent major changes in program format will be reviewed by the Assistant Directors and studied further. More study and proper evaluation is needed to ensure that the needs of transfer students are met and that students clearly understand the transfer process at NC State University.

The participants expressed appreciation for New Student Orientation taking the initiative and providing the opportunity for them to share their experiences. They all expressed an interest in serving as a resource for future NSO programs and will be called upon to volunteer at future transfer student programs.

New Student Orientation will use the focus group results to make improvements in their transfer student programs and determine what new initiatives need to be established and implemented for 2006. These results will be shared with members of the NSO Advisory Committee, Dean of Undergraduate Academic Programs, and NC State's Transfer Student Coordinators.