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Exploring New Faculty Orientation: The Good, The Bad, and Making it Better

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Abstract

This article reports survey results of a special segment of academics, those who worked in industry prior to becoming full-time faculty. The survey solicited their opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of university and department orientation programs. The survey results suggest that most institutions have orientation programs and the participation rate is high. Interaction with other faculty and interaction senior faculty were the most frequently selected strengths. Lack of a feedback mechanism was the most frequently selected weakness. Analyses of suggestions reveal eight areas where institutions can assist the general new faculty member, mentoring being the most recommended.

Introduction

Most schools have recognized the need to have some type of orientation or mentor program for new faculty but are they effective? One aspect of job satisfaction is successfully performing what is required. A study of nurses showed that confidence was a significant contributor to job satisfaction (Ernst, Messmer, Franco, & Gonzalez, 2004). Good prospects for promotion was among the top ten items selected as contributing to retention in the teaching profession in a study by Rhodes, Nevill and Allen (2004). An effective orientation program should help increase confidence, performance, and promotion potential. Providing an orientation program that assists new faculty in becoming successful educators is in the best interest of all concerned.

Faculty orientation programs have been implemented at all educational levels: graduate students who plan to teach, K-12 teachers, community college teachers, and post-secondary educators. For example, Ohio State University offers faculty development and in-service training for its graduate assistants (Rosenberg, 1993), and St. Louis Community College developed a yearlong program to orient new faculty after a large number of its faculty retired (Welch, 2002). At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a group of new faculty formed a self-governing support group to increase the potential for success (Lewallen, Crane, Letvak, Jones, & Hu, 2003). At the author's institution, new faculty orientation is provided by the Teaching and Learning Center and is termed faculty mentoring. Though traditional faculty mentoring occurs between a senior and a new or junior faculty member, the broader definition at the author's institution includes a series of presentations and seminars on a variety of topics about teaching, students, and various aspects of the university (Faculty Mentoring, n.d.) Additional activities are conducted at the college or department level.

Evaluating effectiveness is an important aspect of any program. Though the literature describes many programs, very little empirical data is available on how many institutions have programs, or the strengths and weaknesses of existing orientation programs. This study

investigated the opinions of an increasing body of academics on the orientation programs available to new faculty. As experienced industry professionals seek new careers for various reasons, some have turned to academia. Though these professionals may have many years of work experience, they may be completely unfamiliar with the workings of academia. This study seeks to provide data on perceived strengths and weaknesses of university and college/department orientation programs and to provide suggestions for their improvement. The results are applicable for all new faculty members and institutions desiring effective orientation programs.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were full-time faculty who had previously worked in industry, including government. There were no restrictions on the length of time worked in industry or the length of time since the transition to academia. Ninety surveys were received. One was discarded because the responder appeared not to be in the target population. Also excluded from this analysis were two Ph.D. students who are still preparing to make the transition to full-time academia.

Thirty-three different universities were included in the responses. One institution is unknown. Multiple responders requested that their institution not be identified. The universities were located in the southern and eastern United States from Texas to New Jersey. Seventeen schools had a single responder. The highest number of responders from a single institution was 18. Table 1 presents the number of universities with a particular number of responders.

# Universities	17	6	5	3	1	1	1
# Responders	1	2	3	4	5	8	18

The gender of the study participants is as follows: 77% male, 21.8% females, and one not given. The ethnicity is as follows: Caucasian/White: 78%, African American: 4.6%, Asian/ Pacific Islander: 3.4%, Black African, American Indian (mixed): 1.1% each, Rather not say or not given: 11.5%.

Survey Instrument

A survey was used to gather data from the respondents. Orientation strengths and weaknesses were measured by asking "Does your institution have a program to help orient new faculty?" This was followed by the question "If yes, did you participate in the program?" The same two questions were asked relative to "your department or college." The selectable responses were yes and no. Specific strengths were found using the question, "If applicable, what are the strengths of either the overall institution or department/college orientation program(s)? Check all that apply." The possible choices were: Web site of information for new faculty, Mentor program, Advisor Training, Effective Teacher Training, Research Training, Interaction with Senior Faculty, Interaction with Other Faculty, University specific navigation/procedures, and Other, with space to provide a response.

Specific weaknesses were collected using the question, “If applicable, what are the weaknesses of either the overall institution or department/college orientation program(s)? Check all that apply.” The possible choices were: Unhelpful, Too shallow, No or unknown objectives, No feedback mechanism, Untimely, Poorly organized, Poorly advertised, Poor delivery, Too detailed, Not mandatory, Mandatory, Lacked (specify), with room to respond and Other, with space to provide a response. The survey also contained the following question: “What can institutions do to help faculty who are transitioning from industry to academia?” In addition, to general demographic information, responders were asked to provide their number of years in academia.

Procedure

Surveys were distributed directly and indirectly. Surveys were sent to the e-mail addresses of the membership of the Southern Business Administration Association (SBAA). The SBAA is a professional networking organization of collegiate business school deans. Many of these programs are located in the Southern United States, but some are outside the South and as far away as Canada. The SBAA was selected because deans have access to information regarding employment histories of school faculty. Surveys were also sent to deans at the author’s institution and deans and individuals at other institutions known to the author. Those contacted were asked to forward the survey or provide contact information for persons in the target population. Some contacts forwarded the survey; others provided a list of e-mail addresses of appropriate faculty. In addition, the author asked individuals known to be in the target population to complete the survey.

The survey instructions identified the target population, and the reason for the survey, which included identifying ways institutions can assist in the transition from industry to academia. The instructions also made a request for participation and stated that the responses would be anonymous and not linked to any individual. Recipients were also encouraged to provide a copy of the survey to others known to have made the transition from industry to academia. Surveys could be returned by e-mail, postal mail, or fax. All three methods were employed with the majority returned by e-mail.

Results

Existence and Participation

Sixty-five of the 87 survey responders or 74% indicated that their institution currently has an orientation program for new faculty. Some respondents indicated that though the institution did not have an orientation program when they started there is currently a program. Some conflicting information exists for institutions with multiple responders. This could be expected by responders who began before the orientation was established but new faculty members of only 1 year also indicated that no program existed when others not only said there was a program but they had also participated in the program.

Fifty-one or 78% of the responders that indicated there was a university orientation program participated in the program. Significantly fewer responders indicated there was a department or college orientation program though the participation level was higher. That is, 36% or 31 of 87 specified a department or college orientation and 84% or 26 of 31

participated in the program. Some responders indicated that an informal mentor program or an informal peer group existed.

The results for faculty with five or fewer years in academia showed an increased participation rate. There were 26 responders with five or fewer years and 23 or 89% indicated a university orientation program, 42% had a department or college program. The participation rate for both programs was high; 83% participated in the university program, and 90% participated in the department or college program.

Strengths

Table 2 presents the selected strengths listed in order of frequency. The count for research was increased by one to reflect a comment of “focus on research” listed in the space for *other* by one responder. The two most frequently selected strengths were *interaction with other faculty* followed by *interaction with senior faculty*. The selection rate for interaction with faculty, other and senior, exceeded the selection rate for the bottom five strengths combined. The top two strengths for faculty with five or fewer years in academia were also *interaction with other faculty* and *interaction with senior faculty*, with a selection count of 14 and 12. The third strength for newer faculty was *mentor program* with a count of nine followed by six for *university specific navigation/procedures*.

Strength	Frequency
Interaction with Other Faculty	35
Interaction with Senior Faculty	23
University specific navigation/procedures	19
Mentor program	17
Advisor Training	14
Effective Teacher Training	11
Web site of information for new faculty	11
Research Training	3

The written responses revealed an additional strength with a frequency of three. The following comments reflect what could be termed a helpful climate:

- Very friendly atmosphere within the College of Business
- Some of these (strengths) are not formally in place but our department has the wonderful attribute of being a place where people are productive, collegial and extremely helpful to new faculty who are trying to establish themselves in their respective areas
- Support of department head

One responder added “Interaction w/other college’s departments (diversity)” in addition to interaction with other faculty. Another added “university mission and culture” instead of selecting *university specific navigation/procedures*.

Weaknesses

Table 3 displays the weaknesses listed in order of selection frequency. The most often selected weakness was the absence of a feedback mechanism. The second most selected weakness was that the program was too shallow. No feedback mechanism was also the most often selected weakness among faculty with five or fewer years with a count of six. Too shallow and poorly organized both had a frequency of five among these newest faculty members.

Specific comments reveal why programs might be considered too shallow:

- Orientation only dealt with benefits and sexual harassment
- Essentially non-existent
- Orientation addressed only mechanics of payroll
- We just learned about how the university worked

A combination of comments revealed a list of specific areas where programs are lacking: (effective) teacher training, research tips, technology training, tenure and promotion guidelines, advising and departmental functionality, actionable tools, information on common tasks such as benefits, parking, telephones, w-2's, organization for longer term impact, and relevance.

Weakness	Frequency
No feedback mechanism	18
Too shallow	14
Lacking in some area	12
Poorly organized	11
No or unknown objectives	10
Unhelpful	9
Not mandatory	8
Poorly advertised	4
Untimely	3
Poor delivery	3
Too detailed	1
Mandatory	2

Suggestions

Sixty-eight or 78% of the respondents provided comments on what institutions can do to help faculty who are transitioning from industry to academia. Some suggestions are specific to the transitioned industry professional but most apply to the general new faculty member. Analyses of the comments reveal eight areas where institutions can assist the general new faculty member:

1. Mentoring

This was the most often cited area. In addition to just providing mentors, responders recommended peer mentors, interested faculty, senior faculty, pairing with an established

faculty member, university instead of department provided for the 1st year, and a two-three year program with senior-tenured faculty. Respondents desired the following from mentors:

- Explanation of exactly what is expected and how to be successful in tenure and promotion
- Guidance in class preparation
- Assistance in how to get published
- Help with integration into academic life

2. *Research*

Suggestions in this area included:

- Provide insight into different techniques for conducting research
- Provide sample articles written by senior members of the discipline
- Assist the new faculty member with getting published
- Make the faculty member aware of the *real* publication requirements early
- Collaborate on research and publications

3. *Teaching*

Recommendations for assistance in teaching included:

- Increase amount of time and training for new teachers
- Provide information on effective teaching skills
- Observe classroom teaching content and style to offer helpful guidance
- Provide assistance in classroom management including handling the class from the first day and on how to encourage student participation
- Share course resources
- Discuss grading options and provide tips on testing
- Suggest ways of evaluating teaching effectiveness
- Provide better measures for gauging effective teaching

4. *Training and financial support*

Responders desired financial support to update their knowledge and skills and for professional development. Respondents also expressed a desire for advising and other training programs.

5. *Interactions and networking*

The desire for interaction with other faculty and senior faculty was repeated in these comments. Additionally, time with deans and chairs was suggested. This interaction was for helping to understand how a university operates, sharing resources, and proactively seeking how to help the new faculty member. Other comments relative to interactions follows:

- Carefully select committee assignments to permit new faculty to participate, contribute, and meet others all over campus
- Foster social congeniality among faculty and staff because many challenges and opportunities facing faculty require cooperation from fellow members of the faculty and staff
- Provide support for conference attendance to enable faculty members to develop networks within the academic community

6. *Understanding, expectations, and feedback*

Respondents expressed the desire for personal feedback, clear expectations, and understanding of both students and the university as seen in the following sample suggestions:

- Fully define and explain the meaning of and purpose for effective teaching and relevant, well-crafted research
- Make research and teaching expectations crystal clear and provide ongoing feedback that helps new faculty interpret their degree of progress
- Clarify expectations, present a clear timeline of expectations, and identify how each task will be evaluated
- Conduct yearly reviews
- Help with understanding the make-up and expectations of the student population
- Provide a comprehensive description of university operations

7. Time

The survey respondents provided two suggestions to help ease the time pressures of new faculty:

- Limit the number of classes and new preparations for the first year or two
- Reduce service demands for the 1st few years to help them get into the research habit

8. New faculty orientation

Respondents recommended a formal program, a longer orientation period, concentrating on the orientation strengths listed in the survey, and having all members of the department participate.

Discussion

Unsuccessful faculty harm all those involved: the individual faculty member, the students, the department and institution that have invested time and money in the faculty member, and other faculty who may fear similar results. Effective orientation programs can increase the probability that faculty will become successful. This study reveals many ideas an institution can use in implementing an orientation program, or to improve and evaluate an existing program. Because institutions have recognized the potential benefits of a faculty orientation or development program, many have such programs. However, the results of this study show that just having a program does not mean it is effective from the perspective of the program recipients. It is also disturbing that at an institution where multiple respondents indicated there is a program others indicated the contrary. This may indicate the need for increased advertising.

Because measuring is an effective means of obtaining information, one of the first means of improving an orientation program is to put in a feedback mechanism. This was the most frequently selected weakness, which means institutions are missing an opportunity to improve. If the goal is really to assist faculty, this should be a top priority. The study results reveal aspects to avoid in the list of weaknesses and aspects to seek in the strengths identified however, ongoing internal evaluation will allow for continuous improvement.

The suggestions of how institutions can assist new faculty reinforce the need for a comprehensive orientation program and provide additional recommendations for institutions.

The suggestion most prevalent when given the opportunity to make freeform comments was for a formal mentor program. However, caution must be exercised in the implementation and operation of a mentor program. Many have written about the characteristics of successful mentor programs and others have written of specific personal successful experiences. (Savage, Karp, & Logue, 2004; Gaskin Lumpkin; Tennant & Hambright, 2003; Diamantes, 2004). It is more difficult however to write of unsuccessful experiences because of fear of negative repercussions. However, analyzing and responding to failures is an effective means of improving. Because of the anonymity of the survey, respondents revealed that failures do occur. Issues identified included mentors too busy to meet, disinterested mentors, lack of program direction, and mentor questions and discussions used adversely during pre-tenure review. Though mentor programs can be very effective, they can also be completely unhelpful and potentially harmful.

Orientations experienced by the respondents varied greatly from a two-hour session, to an informal mentoring program, to a congenial atmosphere where questions are welcomed, to a formal program encompassing several areas of concern to the new and developing faculty member. The results of this study show that an effective program must address specific and long-term needs of the faculty member.

In addition to helping to develop successful faculty, there is a need to retain faculty. Johnsrud (2002) stated that identifying the issues that matter to the employee increase both performance and retention. Barnes, Agago, and Coombs (1998) found in a study of faculty intention to leave academia that the two leading predictors are time constraints and lack of a sense of community at the institution. Sorcinelli (2002) stated that clear and consistent expectations, feedback, mentoring, and orientation are all necessary to assist the new faculty member. Johnsrud (2002) sites a study by Hagedorn that associates increased job satisfaction for new faculty with positive relationships with administrators. The respondents in the current study included all these areas in the suggestions for assisting new faculty. Some institutions have attempted to address these concerns but this study indicates that additional emphasis is needed.

This study did not distinguish how long it had been since the responders participated or had the opportunity to participate in an orientation program. The short-term versus the longer-term view of a program's strengths and weaknesses might differ over time. Additionally, strengths and weaknesses were not separated by provider. However, although programs at a particular institution may have changed, the weaknesses or strengths revealed are still relevant areas to avoid or seek. Also, feedback mechanisms for individual programs should be separate to allow for improvement in a specific program.

Previous studies have identified areas of concern for new faculty. The results of this study indicate that faculty members transitioning from industry to academia have many of the same concerns. Institutions should seek to improve their efforts in assisting new faculty become successful faculty. Top priorities should be to seek feedback from their faculty members about existing programs, encourage faculty interaction with new faculty members, and seek to implement suggestions identified in this study.

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