6 Moving Beyond the One-Shot Orientation: Understanding and Making the Most of Ongoing Orientations

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Introduction

Every graduate program has an orientation for incoming students, and many institutions of higher education have a similar orientation session for new faculty. Additionally, political science departments often host an annual check-in event for adjunct faculty. Yet, little long-term programming is developed and delivered for returning students or tenure track and fixed term faculty. The limited programming is unfortunate because a one-shot orientation cannot adequately introduce students and faculty to their colleagues, universities, and disciplines, nor does it ensure they are connected to mentors who can help them thrive. Orientations, as they are generally offered, are time-limited events that aim to answer big general questions—many of which do not arise until the person has been at the institution for some time—and it is assumed that, once oriented, the new person will find or be found by a mentor or will do well enough without one. To respond to these conditions, we argue that an orientation should be an ongoing process into the complex environment in which all people share responsibilities for welcoming and getting to know others. If orientation is limited to a single office and a one-time event, it is more likely to simply answer questions on a prepared checklist rather than truly help situate a person in a particular field or space. This is especially so in universities and academic departments. The diversity of people within and entering mean that there is no single, complete list of data a new person should know. Rather, a person is entering a dynamic environment with different persons, relationships, offices, and responsibilities. Since this chapter recommends a vision of orientation that is ongoing, reflective, and mindful of representation and inclusion (Mealy 2009; Mealy 2018; Tormos-Aponte and Velez-Serrano 2020; Yanow 2020), it contributes to research that emphasizes the importance of early efforts by both students and faculty to establish proactive relationship-building and to facilitate early professionalization into the field (Fugate, Jaramillo, and Preuhs 2002; Hu, Kuh, and Li 2008). This vision is supplemented with practical behavioral suggestions based on the authors' experiences as graduate students, adjunct faculty, full-time faculty, and department chair. This chapter will also explain what orientation should be and why this is something that must be understood as occurring over time, with varying people, and in multiple spaces. It will also make recommendations for students and faculty which will help build the practices and expectations that can make orientation an ongoing activity.

Orientation as One-Off and On-Going

O*rientations* are generally one-off events in which introductions are made, slides are shown and, possibly, some icebreaking activity takes place and libations are eventually enjoyed. Orientations have

generally moved from addressing traditional academic topics (e.g., questions about comprehensive exams), administrative (e.g., a flow chart in the department and college) and organizational (e.g., unions) matters to also include social (e.g., relevant social groups) and emotional (e.g., relevant support offices) and psychological (e.g., mental health and other services) ones. This approach would be adequate if new students and faculty were entering largely familiar settings and expectations. Yet, moving from an undergraduate or graduate experience, the working world, or even a faculty position at another university is not so simple. Indeed, while all universities and departments have strategic plans, visions, by-laws, and a wide range of supporting committees and departments they vary significantly in reach, import, and dynamism and such variation can have a significant impact on one's ability to excel in a department and personally flourish. The types of services, expectations, strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities provided by the various levels of administration within the university are heightened by particularities of the personalities who occupy formal and informal positions in the department. Thus, while any department is likely to have some support at the library or inclusion initiatives, the personnel, types, range, and effectiveness of programs vary considerably.

In most orientations, departments or universities introduce new members of the academic community to a broad set of topics, people, and offices but, inevitably, the new members witness little more than short presentations and receive business cards.[1] They can hardly address the issues that emerge in any depth, and they rely on the person to remember the names and functions of various offices. Unfortunately, there is a time gap between when one learns of, say, who handles internal grants or complaints, and when a relevant situation emerges. Additionally, staff change, funding wanes and swells, and offices get reorganized, repurposed, or collapsed into other units. As such, the checklist from day one easily fades behind the most pressing responsibilities of grading hundreds of student papers, pursuing publication, and participating in academic service. When a department maintains the orientation process open it signals to graduate students and faculty that their membership in the community is something to be taken seriously over time, not a concern raised before the semester and 'real work' emerges. The following sections offer recommendations for graduate students and early career scholars in working with the department to keep the orientation process dynamic.

During Graduate School

While the previous section addressed a view of how departments usually think of and practice orientation, this section offers a more bottom-up discussion and considers what the student can and should do regardless of what the *status quo* is in the department. One of the most important insights about offering advice with the privilege of hindsight is that we are aware that graduate school can be most fruitful when students take on a proactive approach to developing research within their department and outside of it. The subsequent sections aim to support this claim.

Proactive Relationship-Building

Usually, when graduate students take the first step in relationship building within their department, they are most likely to seek out people who are similar to them in terms of subfield, thematic, regional, and methodological preferences. This goes against the mantra repeated at many orientations that students should leave silos and comfort zones and should reinvigorate research questions with fresh perspectives. Yet, students are also expected to hit the ground running and to work on comprehensive exams or qualifying papers in their second or third years. Students and faculty work backwards and expect relationships with qualifying paper readers to develop in year one. The recommendations below offer guidance on ways to overcome the temptation of strategic relationship building to help students get the most of the opportunities and resources within their department:

- Students can request information on the office hours of faculty with whom they have had class and with those who they have not had class early on in the program. This is important since graduate students who know that office hours are intended to provide a regular and permanent space for faculty-student interaction and build social capital are more proactive

and tend to develop relationships with one or more faculty members early (Guerreo and Rod 2013; Pascarella et al. 2000).[2]

- The department can recommend workshops, events, and lectures organized by students and faculty in other subfields and students ought to make an effort to participate in a few of these each semester. It is precisely in these areas when students are not motivated to build a network for strategic reasons that they are often most capable of learning a more general lesson about the craft of scholarship or the way the field works.
- Students can follow up with visiting scholars or professors engaged in organizing low-stakes events. This will allow students to build a network and continue to learn about research, scholars, and methods that students might have otherwise missed when operating within events organized by their primary subfields.
- Students should begin writing and researching preliminary ideas from early seminar papers sooner rather than later. Indeed, taking on this task is fruitful since it may also facilitate interactions with faculty earlier and can prompt ideas for review essays or short research notes that can generate long term projects. Engaging in these exercises can also help students begin to think about how classic paradigms in the field interact with emerging and cutting-edge research.

All in all, these recommendations encourage students to take the lead. While some faculty make initial efforts to orient, mentor, and welcome students, many still expect graduate students to take the first step in establishing a professional relationship. Of course, this expectation creates difficulties for first year students, who may be reluctant to go to office hours without a specific class-related question and are unlikely to see classroom professors as advisors with whom they could discuss general questions. Ideally, in a department where all faculty take on some responsibility for welcoming new students and are cognizant of a responsibility for continual orientation of students, students will be able to recognize how faculty will look out for students (Hesli and Fink 2003).[3] However, sometimes this proactive effort is not wholly institutionalized and as such, after reading this guidebook students should have actionable recommendations to take the lead in helping the department faculty and administration produce and reproduce the practices that help orientation remain an ongoing process in different arenas. If students manage to achieve this, with support of the department, they will likely discover unexpected connections and wisdom (Munck and Snyder 2007), and also to get to know the people, the chief resources of the department, who can contribute to helping the student learn new literature, gain new perspectives, and experiment with different types of material. These gains all contribute to the scholarly development and success of graduate students.

Early and Continued Exposure to Professionalization into the Field

In addition to proactive relationship building, orientation as an ongoing process should not simply introduce students to a department but also to a field and one of the most important ways to experience and understand political science is to participate in academic conferences. Often graduate students are advised to refrain from participating in these events until they have concrete research questions, plans, and contributions to the field. Faculty should encourage students in graduate classes to consider coordinating a panel at a local political science conference as the experience helps students develop a sense of community, builds oral presentation skills, motivates students to make research meaningful for an audience beyond a classroom, and exposes them to feedback.[4] These are very clear and actionable ways in which all faculty can be part of an ongoing orientation process. (For more insight on conference attendance, see chapter 21). Below we offer some actionable recommendations for students to take the lead in early professionalization:

- Attend conferences early and in person, so as to learn experientially what it means to "do" political science and build a scholarly network. Initial participation might be simply as a member of an audience or as a poster session presenter. But there is also little harm in presenting research and hon-

estly communicating to an audience that research is preliminary and you look forward to receiving comments. Perhaps the most important part of this task for students is to learn the Platonic lesson of knowing what they do not know.

- Network with peers who are asking similar research questions and are in a similar subfield. This is quite important since it is often difficult to find students with a similar research agenda within one's own department, particularly when the department is small or returning graduate students are not present in the department.
- Co-author with future colleagues within or outside other departments while in graduate school. This can be quite helpful for students once they have begun to work on their dissertation, including by helping students overcome the intense isolation that accompanies a narrowly focused research process. During the dissertation process which appears so solitary, faculty can also be helpful in guiding students about how to set up boundaries during co-authorship and how to make the best of a collaborative experience. That is, faculty can continue to orient their students.

In the aggregate, the experience of early professionalization gives students a more accurate image of critical aspects of the profession than would participation as a student in a classroom. While COVID-19 has facilitated opportunities for virtual events, it is still advisable to prioritize attending conferences in person. In hallways, book exhibits, and cafes nearby participants make unexpected connections, follow up on insightful questions asked during question-and-answer periods, meet people whose research they know or who are at departments where faculty of interest work, and they do so as they walk from one room to the next or on the way to get a warm drink or to explore the city where the conference is situated. These are places where some of the most important orientation takes place.

Faculty Orientation

This section extends our approach of orientation as an ongoing process to early stages in an academic career. Adjunct faculty, often advanced graduate students, tend to receive no orientation or have an informal and brief one in their interview with the hiring person or committee. Many departments host once a year (some once a semester) meetings where adjunct faculty and the relevant director meet to discuss the upcoming semester. Adjunct faculty often only meet the tenure-line faculty who they actively seek out, who teach in the classroom near them, or who occupy a relevant office (e.g., chair). Not only does this limit the ability of the faculty member to know the department, and thus to advise students, but it can be jarring when the department selects a new chair or graduate program director.

Recently, a number of universities have implemented one semester or one-year orientations for new full-time faculty. These programs involve monthly meetings, are led by a senior faculty member, often supported by other veteran faculty as mentors. The program usually consists of addressing in more depth and with more participation issues that might ordinarily be raised in a typical orientation (e.g., the dean of students speaks about what his or her office does, interventions for struggling students, etc.). For example, a November workshop on student success and assessment could allow faculty, new and veteran, to discuss mid-term assignments as a community, build fellowship, and come up with potentially long-term strategies.

As with any orientation program, these programs end. A faculty member after one year may understand quite a bit of the department and university and know where and to whom one should go for particular information, but there is still much to be learned. Some will be capable of figuring this out, using contacts made, and finding new resources over time. But many, unintentionally, retrench into classes and research and easily lose track of the sense of participating in a community. This is true at the departmental and university level. It is not unusual for faculty members in the same department who like and respect each other to see each other only once a month at department meetings, and for faculty members who once met in a first-year experience to see each other every few months or years. Associate professors are, on average, the least satisfied and most anxious (Jacobs and Winslow 2004). It is at this stage in the career, and lives, of many where there is a particular need for re-orientation.[5] Normally, if leaders think about this issue, it is thought of as a question of mentoring,[6] but it is deeper than this and

is best addressed by a department and university commitment to continually offering opportunities for faculty of different ranks and disciplines to learn about how they and others participate in disciplines and a broader professional academic field that undergoes change.

Departments should develop their own ongoing orientation activities to facilitate the regular participation of faculty trained in different generations and with different methodological and thematic preferences in discussions about the field, where it is, and where it should be. This can help with some of the potential challenges associated with faculty searches. Pairing faculty up with others in the department (and rearranging the pairs every year or two) for ongoing orientation and mentoring can be very helpful. Putting aside departmental resources to support jointly authored papers between faculty and faculty and students can also help foster relationships and belonging. Another way to institutionalize opportunities for ongoing orientation for faculty is to hold faculty presentations and workshops which are meant to either let a faculty member walk through the reasoning for studying a specific issue or to teach and give insight into a particular methodology or literature. Rather than having faculty presenting 'finished' products for review (important for other reasons), allowing faculty to explore and publicly deliberate on why "X" is of interest and how they think it can be studied or to share and teach colleagues are moments in which greater awareness of colleagues and the field can be developed.

Conclusion: Enjoying the Valleys of Learning

One of the most insightful recommendations received from a former colleague during orientation was to enjoy the valleys of learning. Indeed, this is a recommendation for students, professors, and administrators alike. The wisdom in the expression lends itself to many situations without one specific mechanism for application of the insight. One lesson from more than two decades as an academic is that frustration in research and teaching is normal but can be productive as well as disabling. In class, one of us reminds students that almost all of the time spent on a paper is spent figuring out what one wants to argue vis-a-vis extant literature, while writing the paper can be done in a short time. Yet, scholars tend to feel they have accomplished something only when they see words on a page. Frustration is bound to emerge, and it is important to remind students that much learning does not produce immediately obvious standards of success, such as a paper, publication, or grant. Students need a strategy for building a successful career while navigating academia's *culture of overwork* (for more insight into this culture, see chapter 53.)

Anticipating these highs and lows, understanding how common they are in the field and profession, experiencing them with a concerned cohort of fellow students and engaged faculty all enrich the graduate experience and help overcome the challenges faced. These challenges are real as usually only 26–27% of graduate students in doctoral programs in political science make it to ABD status (APSA 2021, 9). Additionally, roughly 32% of students land a tenure track position after graduating (APSA 2021, 10).[7] (Chapter 66 provides insight into the decision to leave graduate school, while chapters 41 and 42 detail ways to pursue careers outside of academia.) Orienting students early and in an ongoing fashion can best provide students with information, activities, networks, and confidence that can lead to success and happiness in graduate school and beyond.

Endnotes

1 The great challenge of an orientation is that it aims to convey wisdom that was learned over time, in dialogue and struggle, in edited form, separated from lived experience. The role time plays in becoming a member of a community was attested to in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* where "fellowship," "the special task of political science" is understood as something that occurs only after trials over time (EE 1234b22-23, 1237b/1238a3).

2 Those who do not know about office hours or face an 'imposter syndrome' are less likely to seek out faculty unless there is a problem, and even then only after the problem has snowballed that the student feels overwhelmed. Underrepresented students who are among the first in their family and social circle to enter graduate school are more likely to struggle with proactive engagement with faculty (Gable 2021). This difficulty is driven by misperceptions about office hours, which can be accentuated if students have one or two bad experiences either during their time as

undergraduates or as graduate students.

3 One practice that is especially helpful is to ask students in office hours, 'how are your other classes going?' and 'how has your first/second/third year been going?' Questions which move the discussion to the student's general experience outside of your class together can open up space for students to feel more comfortable and ask different questions which can be fundamental to the student's success, professional development, and personal flourishing. Although faculty often feel rushed, they should be very careful to model academic engagement in office hours: office hours should not be seen as responding to student questions, but as opportunities to learn about the students and understand how better to direct their attention and studies.

4 There are, of course, some conferences that are more inviting for undergraduate and graduate student participation and faculty should share information with students about these conferences.

5 Had they been consciously participating in orientation over time, perhaps they would be less anxious.

6 When one of us began a mentor program, an associate professor asked about whether this was only for new or assistant professors. The program was designed for all faculty, and it matched assistant professors and lecturers with associate professors, associate professors with full professors.

7 This is the11-year average that was provided by APSA before the COVID pandemic. However, in the 2018-2019 year, the average was 28.40%, down about 5 percentage points (p. 10).

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