



# Evaluation of a University’s International Student Orientation Program

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## BACKGROUND

International students contribute approximately \$21.81 billion to the United States economy, and the number of international students in US campuses continues to grow (Hudzik & Briggs, 2012). These students bring valuable experience and scholarship that enrich college learning environments. At the same time, international students also have unique needs and challenges as they enter academic life in the United States (Ueda, 2011). Recruiting, retaining and engaging talented international students are part of the strategic growth plan and mission of VCU. To this end, the university has been proactively seeking to improve services like the orientation program for international students. However, other than informal feedback surveys, no formal evaluations have been conducted to document the impact of the orientation program from the perspectives of key stakeholders.

## ORIENTATION PROGRAM

**Description:** One-day event organized by Global Education Office (GEO) provides information sessions on critical legal/immigration, academic, housing and health to new international students. It is the first formal event to welcome students to the university and the United States.

### Program Goals:

- 1) Welcome students to the country and the university. The program is focused on providing international students opportunities to connect with fellow international students, program staff, student organizations, and cultural orientation events.
- 2) Provide critical information on immigration rules and to ensure through documentation check-in sessions that all required student documents are in order.
- 3) Meet federal requirements of providing immigration information and updating the Student and Exchange Visitor (SEVIS) database; the orientation also ensures that students are aware of rules and responsibilities as holders of student visas and the role of GEO in helping students transition smoothly into academic life in the Unites States.

**Need for Evaluation:** The program staff proactively seeks to improve their services to international students. Although it is mandatory, a number of students fail to attend the orientation day. One of the objectives of the orientation is to ensure all international students are enrolled into the VCU system on orientation day. Nonattendance imposes a strain on the office staff members who have to go over critical information individually with students who missed the event. Periodically, students fail to keep up with visa rules which pose a risk to their studies and stay in the country. These are not intentionally brought on by the students. Recent changes were made to the program including a cut in the amount of information presented to focus more on the services provided by GEO.

## EVALUATION METHODS

### Questions:

- 1) Are the main program objectives being met?
- 2) What are program staff perceptions of the goals for the orientation session?
- 3) What challenges to implementation do program staff experience?
- 4) How can the orientation be improved for students?

### Design:

Formative and summative evaluation using objectives-oriented and participant-oriented approaches (Fitzpatrick, Sanders & Worthen, 2011).

Mixed-methods data collection involved a quantitative student survey and semi-structured interviews with program staff (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

### Participants:

*International Students* (n=154): 74% graduate, 26% undergraduate, representing 24 countries.

*Program Staff* (n=7): included advisers, coordinators and directors involved in organizing and implementing the orientation.

## RESULTS

### Summary of Interview Findings

- There was agreement among the staff members that providing immigration information and meeting federal requirements was a main goal of the orientation.
- Staff members are dedicated to investing time and effort to make the orientation an engaging, interactive experience for students while meeting federal requirements.
- Staff members believe conducting the international student orientation is closely tied with all the important services that students need in order to thrive in an academic and social environment in the U.S.
- Main challenges included organizing the date and time of the orientation in a way that increases student attendance, balancing the diverse needs of students, and logistical issues around planning.
- Staff members commented that recent changes were more aligned with program goals of making orientation welcoming and engaging.

### Summary of Survey Findings

- Students found the orientation to be a useful, welcoming experience. A majority attended the orientation, were able to complete the formalities of checking in documents, received information on federal regulations as well as major services provided by the program.
- About half of the respondents planned to or attended the events provided for international students.
- They consider orientation day as an important source of information on immigration, housing, and university services like blackboard and email.
- Student comments overwhelmingly pointed to immigration and insurance information as the most useful aspect of orientation.
- Information on public transportation, off campus housing, and campus tours would have been beneficial.
- Visa delays, late arrival into the country, and lack of awareness about the orientation were main reasons for non-attendance
- Students provided several suggestions for future orientations.

### Student Survey Results

**Table 1. Student perception and satisfaction of the overall orientation program**

| Survey Item                                       | Agree-Strongly Agree |
|---|----------------------|
| The orientation day was a welcoming experience    | 84%                  |
| It was good opportunity to meet new students      | 63%                  |
| The GEO staff members were friendly               | 93%                  |
| Student volunteers were friendly                  | 90%                  |
| The date of the orientation                       | 76%                  |
| The time schedule of the orientation              | 85%                  |
| The presentation format                           | 83%                  |
| Level of interactivity                            | 70%                  |
| The amount of time dedicated to each presentation | 80%                  |
| The organization of the whole event               | 84%                  |
| The amount of information presented               | 85%                  |

**Table 2. Impact on student awareness of campus resources**

| Survey Item  | Yes | No  |
|--|-----|-----|
| I became aware of the educational tours organized by the GEO for students                      | 85% | 16% |
| I plan to attend one or more of the educational tours organized by GEO                         | 63% | 37% |
| I learned that Wells Fargo would be on-campus organized by the bank to help open bank accounts | 91% | 9%  |
| I am aware of what documents I would need to bring to open a bank account                      | 91% | 9%  |
| I plan to open a bank account during the on-campus session organized by the bank               | 50% | 50% |
| I became aware of the process of obtaining a driver’s license or State ID in Virginia          | 72% | 28% |
| I plan to obtain a driver’s license or State ID this week or next week                         | 47% | 53% |
| I became aware of the process of obtaining a social security number at the information session | 69% | 31% |
| I plan to apply for a Social Security Number this week or next week*                           | 30% | 70% |
| I learned information on on-campus housing for the first time at the session                   | 50% | 50% |
| I learned about how lease-terms generally work in the United States for the first time         | 57% | 43% |
| I learned about campus safety escort services for the first time at the session                | 77% | 23% |

### Example Quotes from Staff Interviews

“If they have gone through the process and are glad that they chose to come to VCU, then I would consider that we have accomplished a lot of what we set out to do...Did orientation make you feel part of VCU, give you confidence the first week of classes? Great we have done our job with that...”

“...those who have missed [the orientation] are not just lacking information but they aren’t seeing the faces of the people in the global education office who are here to help them and I think that’s important ...”

“I think that (old orientation) was not a very effective way to reach students....And cut down on the amount of information that they receive or just focusing on the pertinent information has been helpful.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conduct information workshops on academic and cultural issues to provide students with in-depth information in addition to the overview provided at the orientation.
2. Increase the number of staff meetings for planning and preparation for orientation.
3. Develop a formal student feedback system to inform program staff of student experiences and the effectiveness of services.
4. Collect and maintain student data on attendance, legal and academic incidents to track performance of orientation and related services provided to international students.
5. Use student suggested strategies to increase participation: such as using student organizations and social media to publicize incentives provided at orientation; consider providing temporary accommodations to students to increase participation.