Improving Student Engagement in the College Orientation Program:
An Action Research

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Abstract: The pandemic forced universities to reimagine the delivery of student affairs programs, one of which is the orientation for first-year undergraduates. This study describes an action research that examined how empowerment evaluation could be used to help increase student engagement in a frosh orientation program at a large private university in Manila, Philippines. We collected survey and focus group data from students, faculty, administrators, and staff to clarify the goal of the orientation program, evaluate the activities, and create an action plan for increasing student engagement during frosh orientation. The resulting plan was implemented for the next batch of first-year students. Findings showed that empowerment evaluation allowed stakeholders to define strategies to improve the orientation program and increase student participation and engagement. The empowerment evaluation approach also facilitated the inclusion of different sectors in the planning of the action.

Keywords: Action research; empowerment evaluation; college orientation

I. INTRODUCTION

New student orientations introduce undergraduates to the culture and norms of the university. Orientation programs support students transitioning from high school to college and provide them with the resources to succeed in college. Orientation programs have a positive impact on student retention and persistence through graduation (Cambridge-Williams, Winsler, Kitsantas, & Bernard, 2013); cultural capital and social connectedness (Coleman-Tempel & Ecker-Lyster, 2019); and academic achievement (Lerner, Colucci, & Grebing, 2020).

Student engagement is defined as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009; p. 683). Commonly implemented by university student affairs units, the new student orientation is one activity that contributes to the holistic development of students so their participation and engagement are important. Prior to the pandemic, universities offered orientation programs on campus. Student engagement during in-person orientation events could be easily seen in their attendance and participation. However, restrictions on in-person gatherings forced universities to migrate the orientation program online, using both synchronous and asynchronous components (Prior, Hankins & Gillilan, 2021; Hughes et al., 2021).

One private, Catholic university in Manila, Philippines implemented an online frosh orientation program for two years during the pandemic. For both years, the orientation program was delivered using a combination of synchronous activities and asynchronous modules made available through a learning management system (LMS). Engagement during the synchronous components was lower than the engagement during in-person orientation held before the pandemic. The current action research

sought to examine how an empowerment evaluation can help improve engagement in the frosh orientation program.

Empowerment evaluation is "an evaluation approach that aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by (1) providing program stakeholders with tools for planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of the program, and (2) mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organization" (Wandersman, Snells- Johns, Lentz, Fetterman, Keener, Livet, Imm, and Flaspoler, 2005, p. 28). Empowerment evaluation has similarities with action research, particularly in terms of valuing and prioritizing improvement, inclusion, participation, collaboration, social justice, capacity building, organizational learning, and accountability, and when combined, both approaches can facilitate social change (Fetterman, 2020).

The first year or frosh orientation program is conducted at the start of every academic year and is a much-anticipated event by new undergraduates. Since it is a recurring program, the frosh orientation lends itself easily to an action research project. In this study, we sought to answer the following research question: "How can an empowerment evaluation help increase student engagement in a frosh orientation program?"

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Action Research Design

We used Muir's (2007) action research model, which begins with a problem or issue that is identified by the stakeholders. Stakeholders work together to develop a plan for addressing the issue, which involves implementing new interventions or making changes to existing practices. Once the plan is implemented, stakeholders collect data on the outcomes of the intervention to reflect on them. This reflection forms the basis of the next cycle of action and planning until the desired outcomes are achieved.

2.2 Research Setting

The study was conducted at De La Salle University, a private, Catholic university in Manila, Philippines run by the Brothers of the Christian

Schools. The undergraduate population of the university as of December 2022 was 22,642.

The frosh orientation program, which is the subject of this action research, is implemented by the Office of Student Affairs (OSA) in collaboration with other offices, but primarily with the Office of Student Leadership, Involvement, Formation, and Empowerment (SLIFE). Both authors are program implementers from OSA and SLIFE.

2.3 Participants

We initially collected survey data from students who participated in the AY 2021-2022 plenary frosh orientation program (n = 1,166) and in the synchronous block activity (n = 1,714). We also selected stakeholders (n = 35) of the frosh orientation program to participate in an empowerment evaluation process to develop a plan of action. Those who participated were first-year students (17.1%), student leaders (25.7%), non-academic staff (25.7%), faculty (25.7%), and administrators (22.9%).

We then implemented the revised orientation program to frosh students who entered the university in 2022. A total of 2,584 students evaluated the plenary orientation program and 3,775 students evaluated the block interaction activity. Participants were asked to give consent before they responded to the questionnaires.

2.3 Instruments

We used an online questionnaire to evaluate the AY 2021-2022 orientation program. The questionnaire included statements about the components of the program to which participants indicated their degree of agreement (1 - strongly disagree to 4 - strongly agree). A sample item is "*The session enables me to feel welcomed in the university.*" We also collected qualitative data from participants.

We used a combination of online survey forms and FGD guides to collect data for each phase of the empowerment evaluation process. For phase 1 or mission setting, we used a Google Form with open-ended questions (e.g., "What are the key areas of the orientation program that need our focus and attention?). For phase 2 or taking stock, stakeholders rated how important (1 - least important to 5 - very important) the program components were in achieving

the program's mission, which was defined in phase 1. Based on the ratings, we ranked the components in terms of importance and then asked the stakeholders to evaluate the components according to the quality of implementation (1 - very poor to 10 - very good). For phase 3 or planning for the future, stakeholders used the results of the previous phases to define strategies to improve the orientation program. A shared Google Docs file was used to facilitate the discussion among the stakeholders.

After implementing the revised orientation program, we asked frosh students to evaluate the program using an online form. Students indicated their degree of agreement (1 - strongly disagree to 4 - strongly agree) to statements about the orientation program (e.g., *The activity made me feel welcomed in the university*). Students also gave qualitative feedback on their orientation experience.

2.4 Procedure

The first step in the action research process based on Muir's (2007) approach was to define the issue. We did this by observing and collecting data during the AY 2021-2022 implementation of the frosh orientation program. The second step is to plan the action, which we performed by applying the empowerment evaluation approach.

Fetterman (2001, 2017) describes a three-step approach to empowerment evaluation: (1) Establishing the mission; (2) Taking stock; and (3) Planning for the future. Setting the mission allows the stakeholders to reflect on the quality of the delivery of the orientation program and generate shared goals to improve the program. Taking stock allows the stakeholders to (1) make an inventory of the most important components or aspects of the program, and (2) rate the quality of implementation or execution of these important components. Included in the Taking Stock phase is a dialogue among stakeholders about their reasons for the ratings they assign to program components. Planning for the future gives the stakeholders the opportunity to generate plans and strategies that align with their shared goals and mission, while considering the ratings they gave to the most important program components..

Once the plan had been developed, we implemented it for the next batch of Frosh students during the AY 2022-2023 orientation. Students evaluated the implementation of the revised orientation program through an online form. We used this feedback to reflect on the action and define our next steps for the program.

2.5 Data Analysis

We analyzed quantitative data generated from the evaluation forms using descriptive statistics (e.g., percentages, means). Qualitative responses were analyzed using content analysis. Data from the three phases of empowerment evaluation were analyzed using the procedures recommended by Fetterman (2001).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Defining the Issue

The orientation program was implemented fully online in AY 2021-2022. It included a plenary session that was live-streamed via YouTube Unlisted and featured the university's different student services and programs. The orientation also had two other components - a synchronous Zoom meeting held in blocks of 40 students each, facilitated by student leaders and faculty, and an orientation course offered through a learning management system that included asynchronous modules. The modules included specific information about policies, guidelines, programs, and student affairs services that were important for the academic success of frosh students.

Frosh students (n=1166), who answered the evaluation questions about the plenary session, rated the program with a mean score of 3.72 out of 4. These frosh students expressed a need to improve the video presentations, make the program more interactive, and if possible, hold a face-to-face plenary session.

In relation to the block activity, the participating frosh students (n=1714) who answered the evaluation questions rated the activity with a mean score of 3.77 out of 4. However, these frosh students suggested improving the interaction and engagement components of the activity. Most of the feedback from students pertains to human connection and building support systems.
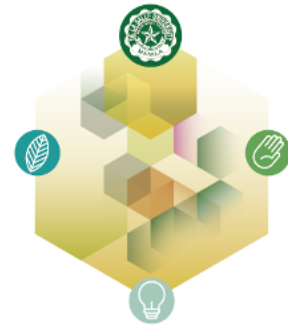
We identified the issue to be a lack of interaction and decreased engagement among the frosh students. Given this issue, we wanted to revise the orientation program while involving stakeholders

in the process. We also wanted to empower student affairs practitioners in evaluating programs. Student affairs work is complex, multifaceted, and constantly evolving due to changing student populations and demographics, technological innovations, trends in higher education practices, and institutional demands (Shutt, Garrett, Lynch, & Dean, 2012). The nature of the work, therefore, requires that it should be constantly evaluated to determine its effectiveness and responsiveness to the changing needs of stakeholders. The evaluation of student affairs services and programs is necessary not only to ensure effective implementation but also for purposes of accountability and continuous improvement (Shutt et al., 2012).

3.2 Planning the Action

We followed the three phases of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2001, 2017): Mission Setting, Taking Stock, and Planning for the Future. In the mission setting step, stakeholders defined the following mission: "*an engaging, informative, and memorable welcoming and orientation program designed to provide Frosh students the means to become Lasallian Achievers for God and Country and facilitate relationship building among Frosh students and with other members of the Lasallian community.*" This statement became the basis for identifying the most important components of the orientation in the taking stock phase.

The Taking Stock phase has two parts. First, stakeholders rated the components of the orientation program in terms of importance, and second, they rated the quality of implementation of the most important components. In part one, stakeholders rated the engagement of students (M = 5.0), making them feel welcome or at home (M = 4.7), and providing them opportunities to connect with their peers and other members of the university (M = 4.5) as the most important aspects of the orientation. In part two, stakeholders gave high ratings, with mean scores ranging from 8.0 to 9.6 on a 10-point scale, for the various important components of the program. This indicates that there is a positive perception of online orientation despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

An important part of taking stock is a discussion of the stakeholders' reasons for the ratings they gave. The Frosh students and the student leaders felt that the online plenary and block interaction would have been more engaging had these been done face-to-face. They also felt that the asynchronous modules in the LMS had valuable content, but these were not interesting enough or visually appealing for the students. The non-academic staff, faculty, and administrators were also concerned about the interaction and participation of Frosh students during the block sessions. Further, they noted that the engagement of the Frosh in the online orientation modules was low, which could result in students being unaware of important University policies and guidelines.

In the third phase, Planning the Future, stakeholders came up with specific strategies for the implementation of the next orientation program. In general, the stakeholders recommended that a face-to-face orientation program with a campus tour be conducted to facilitate student interaction, engagement, and belonging. The stakeholders also identified specific strategies to engage students in the plenary (e.g., advertise the plenary to frosh to increase attendance), block interaction (e.g., highlight interesting anecdotes about the campus), and asynchronous learning modules (e.g., gamify the modules).

3.3 Implementing the Action

We considered the recommendations of the stakeholders in creating the action plan for the AY 2022-2023 orientation program. Since engagement and interaction were the major issues of the previous orientation program, we revised the orientation program to include a hybrid plenary session and an in-person block interaction session with a campus tour. For the hybrid plenary session, the host and performers were on campus while the frosh students watched the program via YouTube Unlisted. We also made sure that student leaders were interacting with the frosh using the live chat. Student leaders and faculty facilitated the in-person block orientation, which included getting-to-know-you activities and games to help the students connect with their blockmates. The student leaders also took the frosh on a campus tour and they were welcomed by other students from different organizations.
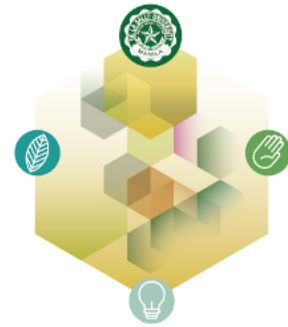
The frosh students also had access to an orientation course in the University's LMS. The learning modules in this online course included

important information about the University values, norms, guidelines, and policies. The course is accessible to students until they graduate.

3.4 Analyzing and Reflecting on the Action

Frosh students (n = 2,584) who attended the hybrid plenary session answered the evaluation form. The plenary session had a mean evaluation rating of 3.75 out of 4. The students found the session to be lively, entertaining, welcoming, and engaging. However, participants suggested moving the activity to the afternoon, showing more of the campus features, and holding the event face-to-face.

Frosh students (n = 3,775) who attended the block interaction activity, campus tour, and frosh welcoming, answered a separate evaluation form. The activities had a mean evaluation score of 3.9 out of 4. Frosh students mentioned that the general atmosphere was welcoming and inclusive. They also appreciated the human interaction during these activities. The in-person activities (block interaction, campus tour, and frosh welcoming) were well-received not only by the frosh students but also by the other members of the University. This was the first in-person orientation held after the University was locked down due to the pandemic and it was natural for all sectors to be excited and engaged in the activities. During the in-person orientation, we felt the enthusiasm and energy of the frosh students as they were welcomed by older students, faculty, non-teaching personnel, and other members of the university community. This was an affirmation that an in-person orientation program was the solution to the issue of lack of engagement and interaction in the online orientation.

There was a significant increase in the attendance of frosh students compared to the previous year's LPEP. In the 2021 LPEP, only 46% of the total number of frosh students attended, while the 2022 LPEP had a turnout of 93% of the frosh students. This indicates that the empowerment evaluation resulted in an improved LPEP implementation and increased student engagement..

4. CONCLUSIONS

The current study demonstrates how empowerment evaluation aids stakeholders to develop an orientation program that is appropriate and responsive to the needs of the students. The recent orientation program provided Frosh students more opportunities for face-to-face interactions, games, and getting-to-know activities, and this facilitated a sense of belonging and community among them.

Combining action research with empowerment evaluation gives program stakeholders more agency and enhances inclusion in the university because feedback from different sectors is recognized and valued. By involving the different sectors in the evaluation process, they become more invested in the program's success and are more likely to actively contribute to its improvement.

Using this approach also allowed us to reflect more carefully on how we revise the programs we offer. It promotes a culture of continuous learning and adaptation. It emphasizes the use of evaluation findings in real-time to inform programmatic decisions and make necessary adjustments. By integrating evaluation into the ongoing program activities, stakeholders can identify emerging issues, adapt strategies, and enhance the program's overall effectiveness. Thus, using empowerment evaluation in planning the action provides student affairs practitioners a model for the systematic evaluation and revision of a program. This approach can then be replicated to other student affairs programs.

Finally, the study also shows that when voices of different stakeholders are heard, there is greater stakeholder buy-in and engagement in the review, planning, and improvement of a program.

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