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Successful Transitions to Graduate School: Using Orientations to Improve Student Experiences in Criminology and Criminal Justice Programs*

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Successful Transitions to Graduate School: Using Orientations to Improve Student Experiences in Criminology and Criminal Justice Programs

ABSTRACT

The initial transition to graduate school provides a critical opportunity for promoting a positive educational experience among incoming students. This study discusses the importance of this transition and then describes a novel student-led orientation approach to facilitating successful entry of new students into criminology and criminal justice graduate degree programs. Results from an evaluation of this approach are presented. Analyses of focus group and student survey data indicate that graduate students matriculating into a criminology and criminal justice program in a southern state felt welcomed and found the information, guidance, and social networks that they developed to be helpful. At the same time, students identified ways the orientation could be improved for future cohorts. A student-led orientation, along with evaluation of it, provides a promising strategy for criminology and criminal justice graduate programs to create positive educational and professionalization experiences for their students.

Key words: graduate students orientations transitions

INTRODUCTION

Criminology and criminal justice graduate programs seek to provide students with experiences that help them to grow intellectually and professionally. Even so, upon entry into school, graduate students face numerous challenges. In turn, these challenges can lead to early departure from programs or to missteps or missed opportunities that delay graduation and impede prospects both for positive learning experiences and for successful careers. Some challenges are seemingly simple. For example, students may not realize that the expectations and demands in graduate courses differ substantially from those in undergraduate courses and that a premium is placed on independent and original thought (Golde, 1998; Isaak & Hubert, 1999; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). They also may not fully appreciate the importance of carefully selecting an advisor (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007). Other challenges may be more complicated. For example, students may be unaware of how their program fits within a broader intellectual community and the normative standards and practices of that community (Golde, 2005; Tinto, 1975). They may be unaware of how to initiate collaborations with faculty and of the importance of these collaborations. They also may not understand how difficult—intellectually, professionally, and personally—graduate school can be. Not least, they may not fully appreciate the importance of developing a support network with other students who can assist them in successfully navigating graduate school.

Universities and departments can and do adopt different strategies for promoting positive graduate student experiences. There remains, however, little insight about the transition into graduate school and what can be done to improve it. Although many universities implement strategies for helping undergraduate students during the first days, weeks, and months after they begin college (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Dabney, Green, & Topalli, 2006), less attention has been given to the graduate student transition. Yet, graduate students also may benefit from assistance when they enter a program. At the same time, they differ both in their characteristics and in the challenges that they will face. They tend to be older,

more mature, have worked in one or more professional jobs, and typically live on their own or with a spouse or partner rather than in dormitories. They also will encounter a qualitatively different type of educational experience, one that emphasizes initiative, independence, writing, and, more generally, behavior that fits with the norms and expectations of a broader professional community (Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2008; Poock, 2004). What is needed, then, are efforts at the point of entry into graduate school that can prepare students for these differences and simultaneously introduce them to the profession in a supportive and helpful manner.

The goal of this paper is to describe and evaluate a novel approach to improving graduate student experiences in master's and doctoral degree criminology and criminal justice programs. This approach—which consists of a student-run orientation and a formative evaluation and summative evaluation process—provides several potential benefits. First, it may improve first-year and subsequent-year experiences in graduate school. Second, it may further the professional development of graduate students. Third, it may help teach graduate students research skills. And, fourth, it may provide actionable feedback to programs about how to improve student experiences and performance during and after graduate school.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL GRADUATE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Higher-education institutions recognize that graduate school can be difficult and so take steps, such as university orientations, to increase student retention and to improve student experiences (Golde, 1998; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Scrivener & Weiss, 2009; Tinto, 1975). Indeed, graduate students face many challenges and barriers that, if not successfully negotiated, can adversely affect them and the likelihood of successfully completing a master's or doctoral degree program (Isaak & Hubert, 1999; Weidman et al., 2001; Zhao et al., 2005).

The graduate school experience differs from an undergraduate experience in many ways, which can surprise students and leave them uncertain about how to proceed. Students' failure to appreciate this difference alone constitutes a significant barrier to success in graduate school.

More specific barriers to success, however, exist. Students may not understand the mission of the program to which they have been admitted (Golde, 1998). They may not know, for example, the extent to which faculty emphasize training that is geared more to an academic career or a non-academic one (Mears, 2010). They also may be unfamiliar with graduation requirements specific to their program. Students may be unprepared for the potentially greater amount of reading and writing that a graduate program may entail. In addition, they may not know about available resources for supporting their academic and professional growth in a program or a disciplinary field. Not least, new students may not feel welcomed or encouraged in ways that they may have felt during their undergraduate studies, especially given the greater emphasis on independent initiative in many graduate programs (Weidman & Stein, 2003).

Additional barriers can be identified. For example, graduate students may not know about, appreciate, or understand the normative expectations of how to act in a given program or discipline (Gardner, 2008; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Weidman et al., 2001). For many new students, the transition to graduate school co-occurs with a transition to a new setting, one where they have no established social networks for work or recreation (Brus, 2006). As a result, they lack the social support that otherwise might assist them in addressing uncertainty about funding for school and everyday expenses, whether they can or will complete their program of study, how to manage coursework requirements effectively, their future career, and more.

TRANSITION EXPERIENCES AND SUCCESS IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

The many potential barriers to a successful graduate school experience underscore the importance of university and program efforts to assist students. For several reasons, a focus on the transition to graduate school constitutes a logical point of departure (Gardner, 2008; Hartman, Bjerregaard, & Lord, 2009).

First, framing theory and the concept of framing bias offer insight for why transitions, and the related first impressions that arise during them, may influence students' long-term success in

graduate school and beyond. The concept of framing suggests that how an event or experience is presented or described—the “frame”—influences the perceptions and choices individuals make (Asch, 1946; Carney, Colvin, & Hall, 2007; Dunegan, 1993; Rabin & Schrag, 1991). For example, framing effects occur when a subject makes a choice based on whether outcomes are phrased as though they are gains or losses (Kahneman, 2011). They occur as well when we must sift through a large amount of information quickly to arrive at an overall assessment of “reality” (Carney et al., 2007). “Frames” can be viewed as cognitive shortcuts that help people make sense of the complex information around them.

When students transition into graduate school, they confront a large amount of disparate information ranging from nuts-and-bolts issues (e.g., where to obtain an e-mail account) to more nebulous ones (e.g., how to act in graduate classes). Necessarily, they rely on “frames” to understand the university, their program and their place in it, and how to act (Weidman & Stein, 2003). Favorable first impressions—if, for example, students feel welcomed and supported—can affect how they perceive the program over time. To illustrate, students with positive initial impressions may be more likely to feel supported and thus to feel comfortable asking for resources, assistance, or guidance as well as initiating collaborations with faculty.

Second, research on socialization theory and the graduate school socialization process highlights the salience of initial transitions (Rosen & Bates, 1967). Gardner (2008:127) has written that “socialization is generally transmitted through the existence of the organizational culture, and in the case of graduate students, through the culture of higher education.” This socialization can occur in different ways throughout graduate school (Weidman & Stein, 2003). A positive socialization experience is especially needed at admission, when students may be most anxious, must digest an overwhelming amount of information, and are likely to form lasting impressions and habits (Golde, 1998; Rosenblatt & Christensen, 1993). A positive experience may assist the student in obtaining relevant information—such as program expectations and culture, course selection, faculty personalities and preferences in how classes run, student resources within the program, and so on—and in identifying specific steps that they can take to

negotiate their first semester. For newcomers in most organizations, information is essential to understanding one's role and how to act, and, in turn, to engendering greater commitment and less stress (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). A positive experience also may assist students in creating positive first impressions that faculty and students have of them. The salience of positive initial socialization experiences in large part grounds the emphasis that universities frequently place on orientations for new students (Pooch, 2004).

Third, scholarship on social support highlights the importance of initial transitions. Studies have shown that social support can be instrumental to fostering emotional and mental wellbeing in the workplace, which in turn can enhance productivity and overall success (Ganster, Fusilier, & Mayes, 1986; Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2003; Monk-Turner & Fogerty, 2010). That is no less true of academic settings (Hodkinson, 2005). In particular, a strong social support system in graduate school, including ties to faculty and other students, can be critical for facilitating a positive graduate school experience (Brus, 2006; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Goplerud, 1980).

ORIENTATIONS AS A MEANS OF ENHANCING SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

Many universities use orientations to facilitate successful transitions for their students and do so premised on framing, socialization, and social support theories (Pooch, 2004). The designs of the orientations vary greatly (Gansemmer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006; Pooch, 2004; Tinto, 1987; Weidman & Stein, 2001). However, similarities exist across many of them. For example, university orientations typically introduce new students to academic requirements, provide tours of campus facilities, identify how to establish e-mail and other accounts, distribute informational brochures, discuss financial aid, describe student organizations, and host welcome events. Less is known about program-specific orientations or their effects. Existing accounts, however, suggest that they typically cover similar terrain but also introduce students to program personnel and faculty as well as to student opportunities and resources unique to the program; these efforts can be successful in improving student academic performance and in promoting greater student

satisfaction, a supportive graduate student culture, and student retention (Poock, 2004).

A central advantage of program-specific orientation lies in the ability to assist students in understanding normative expectations in a specific field and department. For example, criminology and criminal justice programs, like many professional programs, prepare students for academic careers—whether research-focused, teaching-focused, or both—and non-academic careers. Many students may be unaware of the fact that faculty may have different views about these career tracks (Kraska, 2006; Mears, 2010). Some professors may view research as ideal, while others may emphasize teaching or a non-academic, policy- or practice-focused track as ideal. A program-specific orientation can introduce students to these types of distinctions and how the program's faculty view them. Such an orientation also can serve to identify specific course requirements and sequences in a given department and funding opportunities within the program or field. Not least, it can serve to create social ties to faculty and other students, including more experienced, or senior, students who participate in orientation activities.

STUDENT-RUN ORIENTATIONS TO IMPROVE NEW STUDENT TRANSITIONS

Drawing on the above insights and accounts of diverse graduate student orientations, a criminology and criminal justice graduate program in a southern state in the United States designed and implemented an orientation to assist new master's degree and doctoral degree students in having a successful transition that, ideally, would contribute to a positive educational experience. The contours of the orientation were designed based on a review of prior theory and research. Collectively, the different activities that comprised the orientation sought (1) to create a positive initial "frame" or impression for students, one that led them to feel welcomed and supported, (2) to provide information about normative expectations in the program and specific strategies for succeeding, and (3) to create ties to faculty and students that would support them during the transition period and throughout their time in the program.

The orientation was designed to be led by current graduate students, with supervision by a

faculty member, and to include other faculty and current graduate students in the program. The premise was that current students might best be able to provide a welcoming message and know the types of information that new students would most want and need. This approach, too, creates an opportunity for student orientation leaders to develop professionally. In fall 2013, the supervisor was a full professor in the program; each of the two student leaders, one female and one male, were entering their third year in the doctoral degree program.

Costs of the orientation were funded by the program. The total cost was approximately \$700, including \$200 for food, drink, photocopying, and mailing costs, and \$250 stipends for each of the two leaders. Each year, new student leaders are selected after consultation with the Graduate Director, Graduate Coordinator, and other faculty about second-year and third-year students who they feel would be well-suited to organize and run the orientation. The focus is on students who have excelled in the program, appear to be well-integrated into the student body, have effective organizational skills, and convey professionalism. Typically, the goal is to have a female orientation leader and a male orientation leader. The orientation Director contacts the prospective orientation leaders, describes the orientation leader responsibilities, and asks them to respond in several days if they would like to be considered. If they express interest, then the Director interviews them and answers any questions that they may have. The students then have several days to indicate whether they would like to run the orientation. In past years, the leaders received no stipends; a change was introduced beginning in fall 2013 because of the considerable time that the leaders invested throughout the course of the year in the orientation.

The central activities of the orientation, designed for incoming master's degree and doctoral degree students, are described below. These activities unfold over the course of one year.

First, the student leaders communicate with new students prior to their arrival at the program. This process includes sending e-mails and letters welcoming students and a 10-page "Succeeding in Graduate School" guide that was created "by and for" students and that includes tips for negotiating the program and gaining the most from their experience. The guide provides information about campus resources, the library, parking and transportation, health and wellness

services, research support, such as data sources and information about statistical software available on-campus and through discounted student rates, and professional opportunities, such as funding sources and annual professional meetings. On the day of the orientation, the materials handed out include the fall academic calendar and course list, a guide to library resources, a College Handbook, which includes information about degree requirements and timelines, and several brochures describing university services and study abroad opportunities.

Second, a one-day orientation event occurs. During this event, student “orienteers” lead all activities, some of which include the participation of faculty, staff, and other graduate students. The orientation day begins with student introductions and food and drink. The program Director then welcomes the students. A session then focuses on describing the campus and places that they likely will frequent (e.g., library, computer services). Next, the Graduate Student Coordinator and Director of Graduate Studies present information about the curriculum, course offerings, and recommended timelines for completing courses, exams, area papers, etc. One or two faculty proceed to describe funding opportunities to support research, as well as various research opportunities within the program and university. Lunch is provided, and all faculty and current graduate students are asked to join the new students to talk and to socialize informally.

Then several faculty talk with students about academic professionalism and offer guidance about strategies that students will want to consider to navigate the program successfully. Students are given an opportunity to ask questions, many of which center around professionalism and faculty expectations. A similar session then occurs with a set of four to five current graduate students, including ones who intend to complete the master’s degree program only and others who intend to complete the doctoral degree program. They provide guidance as well as insights and tips about addressing the various challenges associated with a transition to the area and program. This session serves to provide students with an opportunity to ask questions about any and all aspects of the graduate program, with no administrators or faculty present.

Throughout the orientation, the emphasis on professionalism features prominently. It is discussed by the Director of the orientation when he meets with the students, the two orientation

leaders during their review of the information brochure, and the professors on the faculty panel. It is also an implicit theme throughout the day as the orientation leaders and session presenters discuss how to succeed in the program, build a professional network, and approach others for collaborations. Professionalism is discussed as an approach that treats graduate school much as one would a job in most industries. It is described as being proactive about work responsibilities, completing course and work assignments in a timely and high-quality manner, seeking out guidance from colleagues in a respectful way, attending class regularly and showing up on time, actively participating in class discussions, and being respectful of faculty, students, and administrators. The emphasis does not center on any one activity. Rather, the Director of orientation, orientation leaders, and faculty emphasize the importance of a cluster of activities that constitute professionalism and how professionalism can help them to gain more from the program and develop stronger social networks that can help them in their careers.

Finally, in the evening, there is a social event where new and current students meet with one another informally. The goal is to provide the students a setting where they can forge ties with others in their cohort and with students further along in the program.

Across all sessions, a strong emphasis is placed on providing incoming students with opportunities to ask questions of faculty, administration, and, not least, other students. By the end of the orientation, the new students meet most of the administrators, three-fourths or more of the faculty, and many of the students who already were enrolled in the program. Faculty are strongly supportive of the orientation and orientation activities and progress is discussed at faculty meetings. Introducing all faculty formally, with time for discussion and questions with each faculty member, at the orientation confronts time constraints that adversely influence the ability to complete other aspects of the orientation. The middle ground has been to formally introduce students to the program Director, Director of Graduate Studies, Director of orientation, and other faculty who participate in the faculty panel and other sessions, and to provide a luncheon and an informal setting where students can meet other faculty. In addition, approximately one month after the start of the school year, the program has an alumni dinner

where students can meet many faculty as well as other students and program graduates.

Third, orientation leaders assist first-year students throughout the school year by being available to address graduate school issues that arise as the new students navigate the program and university. The students simultaneously have access to the Graduate Coordinator and Director of Graduate Studies for questions and issues that may arise.

Fourth, the program and its graduate student organization offer social events throughout the year. The orientation leaders work with the program administration, faculty, and student organizations to ensure that new students are invited and feel welcome to these events.

Fifth, in December, the orientation Director and student leaders conduct a focus group with first-year graduate students to identify any additional assistance that the students may want or concerns that they may have. The focus group also serves to assist the Director and orientation leaders to identify what parts of the orientation were helpful and what parts need modification.

Sixth, in April, the orientation Director and student leaders administer a survey to first-year students. The goal is to assess more systematically the experiences that students had in their first year, ways that the orientation assisted students, changes to the orientation that may be warranted, and activities that the program should consider undertaking to improve the graduate school experience of the new cohort of students. The evaluation helps to educate new students about the program's emphasis on research and to train students in conducting evaluations.

Seventh, in June, a report is distributed to the program Director, Director of Graduate Studies, and Graduate Coordinator. It describes the orientation process, its implementation and effectiveness, and recommendations for improving future orientations.

DATA AND METHODS

OVERVIEW

The study consisted of both a formative evaluation, which sought to provide information about how to improve the graduate student criminology and criminal justice program orientation

at a southern university, and a summative evaluation, which sought to provide an assessment of how well the orientation was implemented and whether it was associated with intended outcomes (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). Primary attention centered on student perceptions of the orientation activities and their perceptions of how well the orientation assisted them in their first-year transition to the program. Accordingly, the study design involved collecting information from students subsequent to the orientation. Prior to conducting the study, the researchers obtained approval from the institutional review board to undertake the research.

Two sources of data were used: focus group responses and responses to a survey questionnaire. Information was collected from new students who entered the program in fall 2013. The focus group was conducted in December 2013 (N=8), the end of the semester in which the new students were first enrolled. An online survey was conducted in April 2014 (N=39; 88 percent response rate based on matriculation of 44 new students). Of the 39 students who completed the survey, 35 attended the orientation; among the 5 students who did not complete the survey, several were unable to attend due to a time conflict with another on-campus orientation to which they were required to attend. Student participation in the program's orientation was, by contrast, voluntary. Students who did not participate in the orientation day activities were not included in the focus group but they were included in the survey because they may have communicated with orientation leaders, and received materials, before the orientation and so could respond to questions about pre-orientation assistance and support.

All questions in the focus group were open-ended and probed students' views about aspects of the orientation that they felt were well-implemented or effective, and why, as well as changes that they would recommend to improve future orientations. The focus group was advertised to all new students who attended orientation. Free snacks and drinks, paid for by the program, were offered. The relatively small showing was not unexpected. It was the end of the semester and courses were in session. Even so, the time was opportune for identifying issues that might be possible to address in the subsequent semester to improve the students' experiences in the program. Those present were representative with respect to gender, but the small number of

participants precluded assessment of how representative, across a wide range of characteristics, the participants were of all new students. Despite the low participation rate, a wide range of views emerged that provided insights into how the orientation might be improved and what the program might do to help improve student experiences in the program.

The survey was conducted online and students were sent e-mails with a link to the survey. Most of the survey questions were closed-ended and are described further below. The high response rate reflects a concerted effort by the orientation leaders to encourage new students to participate. Also, faculty were asked to remind new students during classes to please complete the questionnaire. Two reminder e-mails were sent automatically to students who did not complete the survey. The high response rate lends greater confidence to the analyses and suggests that the identified patterns were representative. It is, of course, possible that the 12 percent who did not participate may have held views about the various questions that differed from the views of those who did participate. We have no way of verifying whether such a difference existed. Accordingly, the results should be viewed with caution.

RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

The demographic characteristics of the study respondents were as follows: age (average=24 years, range=21-37), race and ethnicity (72 percent non-Hispanic white, 28 percent other), and gender (59 percent female, 41 percent male). Of students who entered the program, 59 percent were admitted to the master's degree program and 41 percent to the doctoral program. Forty-eight percent of students entered the program with university or program funding.

IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES

Respondents were asked questions about how well orientation activities were implemented. Each item included a Likert scale that ranged from "1=strongly agree" to "5=strongly disagree."

Welcoming. These questions focused on how welcoming ("The orienteers sent me

welcoming e-mails”) and responsive (“The orienteers were responsive to questions or concerns”) the two orientation leaders were. Similarly, respondents were asked to describe how welcoming the program Director was (“[The Director] showed enthusiasm for the [program]”).

Graduate Coordinator session. The Graduate Coordinator question focused on the clarity of the information that was provided about degree requirements (“[The Coordinator] provided a clear discussion of my degree requirements”).

Graduate Director session. The Graduate Director questions focused on the clarity of the explanation of his/her role (“[The Director] provided a clear discussion about the role of the Graduate Director”) as well as graduate assistantship funding opportunities (“[The Director] provided a clear discussion about how to obtain College funding for graduate assistantships”).

Research and funding session. The questions focused on how to participate in research projects (“[The session] provided clear information about how to participate in current research projects at the [program]”) and how to obtain research funding (“[The session] provided clear information about how to obtain research funding through grants and research agencies”).

Faculty panel. The faculty panel questions focused on the clarity of information communicated about professionalism (“[The panel] provided clear guidance about conducting myself professionally in graduate school”) and working with faculty (“[The panel] provided a clear discussion about how to build positive student-faculty relationships”).

Graduate student panel. The graduate student panel questions focused on describing first-year experiences (“[The panel] provided an accurate description of the first year in graduate school”) and how to navigate graduate school (“[The panel] provided clear information about how to have a successful graduate student experience”).

Post-orientation social event. The post-orientation social event questions focused on student expectations about the event (“I was provided with clear information about what to expect at the post-orientation social event”) and whether it provided an opportunity to meet other graduate students (“At this event, upper-level graduate students interacted with the new students”).

PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS MEASURES

Respondents also were asked questions about the perceived effectiveness of the orientation. The questions about perceived effectiveness of different orientation activities were placed in the middle of the survey questionnaire, after the questions about implementation and before questions about how to improve the orientation. Except where otherwise indicated, all questions were framed in a similar manner: “How helpful was . . . ?” Likert-scale response options ranged from “1=very helpful” to “5=not helpful at all.”

Welcoming. Leadership questions focused on how helpful the leaders’ correspondence was “in easing the transition to the [area]” and, separately, “in easing your transition to the [program].” The questions also focused on the helpfulness of the leaders “in making you feel welcome” and “in preparing you for graduate school.” Additional questions, which were combined into one measure, focused on the program Director’s helpfulness “in making you feel enthusiastic about the program,” “in describing the collegiality between students and faculty,” and “in making you feel that the [program] cares about your success.”

Virtual tour information. A question about the virtual tour focused on the extent to which “[the tour provided] useful information about campus buildings and resources.”

Graduate Student Coordinator session. The Coordinator questions, responses to which were combined into one measure, focused on how helpful the curriculum information was in “[knowing] when to take certain courses,” in “[understanding] your course requirements,” and “in explaining the timeline required to complete your degree.”

Graduate Director session. The Graduate Director questions focused on the extent to which the session helped students “to feel welcome to the [program],” to understand “the role of the Graduate Director,” and “to navigate graduate school,” respectively.

Research and funding session. Questions here focused on the session helpfulness “in providing clear information about how to participate in research projects” and “in providing clear information about how to obtain research funding through grants and research agencies.”

Marked correspondence in responses to the questions led to creation of a combined measure.

Faculty panel. The faculty panel questions asked students to report on how helpful the panel was “in providing information about conducting yourself professionally in graduate school,” “in providing information about how to build positive student-faculty relationships,” and “in making you feel comfortable asking the [program] faculty questions,” respectively.

Study abroad panel. This panel explained to students the study abroad options available through the program. This panel’s effectiveness was measured using responses to the question, “How helpful was the [session] to you in planning your graduate school experience?”

Graduate student panel. The effectiveness of the student panel was measured using responses to several questions. The first set of questions focused on how helpful the panel was in “providing clear information about how to have a successful graduate student experience,” “providing guidance on developing positive relationships with faculty,” “demonstrating that upper-level students are approachable for guidance and support,” and “helping you to select courses.” Responses to these questions were combined into a single measure of student views about the usefulness of information provided by the panel. Another question focused on the helpfulness of the panel in “discussing ways to balance school and out-of-school activities” and still another asked about the panel’s helpfulness in “describing typical graduate student life.”

Post-orientation social event. The effectiveness of the social event was gauged using combined responses to questions about how helpful it was “in assisting you to develop collegial relationships with other first-year graduate students” and, separately, “upper-level students.”

Overall effectiveness. Several questions focused on the orientation’s overall effectiveness. The first question measured the students’ assessment of the orientation in general (“Overall, how helpful was the [program’s] graduate student orientation?”). The second two questions focused on students’ level of satisfaction with their first-year experience in the program: “How positive was your first-year graduate experience in the [program]?” (1=very positive, . . . , 5=not very positive), and “How much do you think that the orientation helped you to have a positive first-year graduate experience in the [program]?” (1=a great deal, . . . , 5=not at all.). A final question

asked students: “Considering your first-year graduate experience, how satisfied are you with your decision to attend the [program]?” (1=very satisfied, . . ., 5=very dissatisfied).

ANALYSES

To investigate student perceptions about the extent to which the orientation was well-implemented and effective and about how it might be improved, we present descriptive statistics from the survey data. An experimental design was not possible, which in turn means that no strong causal inference can be made about whether the orientation produced any identified benefits (Rossi et al., 2004). Even so, student responses can shed light on whether the orientation appeared to be well-implemented or helpful and on ways to improve the orientation. In addition to presenting results from the survey analyses, we discuss insights gained from review of the focus group discussion. Members of the research team typed all comments from the focus group and coded them for themes. The goal of the focus group centered on identifying how students experienced the orientation and their ideas for how it could be improved.

In what follows, we present results for the student sample as a whole. Ancillary analyses were undertaken to identify whether views about the orientation implementation or effectiveness varied depending on the following: age, sex, race and ethnicity, entering with or without a master’s degree, enrolling in the master’s degree program versus the doctoral degree program, and receipt of program teaching or research assistantships or other financial support. The small number of cases precluded robust statistical analysis. Accordingly, these analyses served as an exploratory effort aimed at identifying if any clear, sizable differences could be detected. Across these different groups, however, we detected no clear or pronounced differences.

FINDINGS

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GRADUATE STUDENT ORIENTATION

Figure 1 presents information about student perceptions of how well the different orientation

activities were implemented. Several patterns can be identified. First, most students viewed the activities or sessions as well-implemented. Indeed, over 70 percent reported that they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that a given activity or session had been implemented well. For the Graduate Director discussion of research assistant (RA) funding, 63 percent of students reported that they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that it was well-implemented. The responses were similar for the research opportunities discussion (61 percent) and somewhat lower for the research funding discussion (52 percent).

Insert figure 1 about here

Second, some aspects of the graduate student orientation stood out as being better implemented. In the figure, the black-shaded portion of the bars identify the extent to which students “strongly agreed” that a given activity or session was implemented well. Inspection of the figure highlights several activities and sessions where more than 60 percent of students reported that they “strongly agreed” that the orientation had been well-implemented: the orientation leadership activities, the program Director’s welcome, the faculty discussion of professionalism, and the social event opportunity to meet other students.

Third, despite the largely favorable assessment of the implementation of the orientation, there clearly were some students who felt that it was not implemented as well as it could have been. The focus group discussion proved helpful in explaining why. Here, we focus on several areas where implementation reportedly was the least strong: the Graduate Director session, the research and funding session, and the student panel. For the first two sessions, students reported that there appeared to be less emphasis than they would have expected on the topics that they were told would be discussed. The orientation Director and leaders reflected on these comments and realized that the problem stemmed from not providing the session presenters sufficiently clear guidance about what they should discuss. One surprising insight emerged that pointed to a specific change for future orientations—several students reported that they did not understand

the Graduate Director's role in the program. For the student panel, the problem differed. Panel members reportedly discussed in excessive detail some of the challenges of graduate school and provided less detail about the more fun aspects of school as well as its benefits.

Students identified other dimensions of the orientation that stood out or that might have been better designed or implemented. Many of them emphasized that the pre-orientation correspondence and communications were timely and friendly. They also emphasized that they appreciated the detailed discussion of the curriculum and various degree requirements and timelines. Some felt that the session on study abroad opportunities was interesting but not helpful in the first few days of graduate school. Put differently, they wanted to learn about the study abroad possibilities, just not during the orientation.

PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF THE GRADUATE STUDENT ORIENTATION

Next, we focus on students' assessments of the effectiveness of the orientation. Their assessments of different activities and sessions are presented in figure 2. Here, again, several patterns can be identified that parallel those discussed in the previous section.

Insert figure 2 about here

First, students identified many aspects of the orientation that they viewed as helpful during their transition to, and during their first year in, graduate school. Well over half of students—and in many instances, 80 percent or more of students—reported that they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that a given activity or session was helpful.

Second, students reported that several activities and sessions were especially helpful. These activities and sessions included: the orientation leadership communications and assistance; the program Director's welcome; the Graduate Coordinator's discussion of curriculum requirements and timelines; the Graduate Director's welcome, explanation of the Director's role, and recommendations on navigating graduate school successfully; the faculty panel on “surviving”

and succeeding in graduate school; and the social event and its helpfulness in developing ties to new and current students. In some cases—such as the leadership and the Graduate Director’s welcome, the faculty discussion of professionalism, and the social event—50 percent or more of students reported that “strongly agreed” that the activity or session was helpful.

Third, although many students reported that the various activities and sessions helped them, some reported that certain activities and sessions were “neither helpful nor unhelpful” or “not very helpful.” For example, 32 percent of students reported that the virtual tour was not helpful, 37 percent reported that the research and funding session was not helpful, 53 percent reported that the study abroad session was not helpful, and over 40 percent reported that the student panel discussion was not helpful in conveying an accurate image of how to balance work and out-of-school experiences and, more generally, of life as a graduate student.

Once, again, the focus group discussion illuminates how the orientation was helpful and why some activities and sessions were not as helpful as they could have been. The students emphasized that the welcoming tenor of the orientation—from the orientation leaders, the program Director, other graduate students, and the faculty—helped them to feel better about their decision to enter the program. They especially appreciated the opportunity to learn about the program, and the expectations of them as graduate students, from different individuals and groups. The new students indicated that they entered graduate school with many questions and concerns because of the uncertainty about what they would encounter. The panels helped them to feel comfortable approaching faculty and other students with questions and to feel like they had a better sense of the program’s expectations and how to meet them. Students greatly appreciated the opportunity to connect with current students and to have them, along with the Graduate Coordinator, Graduate Director, and orientation Director and leaders, as resources on which to draw for guidance. They felt that this support helped them during and after the transition into the program in making decisions about course selection, how to act in classes, and how to navigate graduate school. In addition, several students remarked about how helpful they found the “Succeeding in Graduate School” document sent to them by the orienteers prior to the

orientation and their start in the program. Some students found the information to be overwhelming, but others noted that they continued to consult it for guidance.

When prompted to explain why some sessions were perceived as less helpful, students focused primarily on the fact that the focus on study abroad simply was not a priority for them and that learning about it interfered with learning about other topics of more pressing relevance. They also emphasized that the student panel emphasized too much some of the challenges of graduate school, without emphasizing some of the positive aspects of the experience.

PERCEIVED OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS OF GRADUATE STUDENT ORIENTATION

Students were asked to provide an overall assessment of the graduate student orientation. They reported favorably about its helpfulness. Ninety-seven percent indicated that it was “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” (43 percent reported that it was “very helpful”).

The orientation constituted but one part of the activities that the program undertook to promote a positive graduate student experience. Notably, then, 41 percent of students reported that the orientation helped them “a great deal” or “a good amount” to have a positive first-year experience in the program. Another 44 percent indicated that it helped them “somewhat.”

Of particular importance for the orientation, and the program even more so, students uniformly provided a favorable assessment of the program. Specifically, 85 percent of students reported that they had a “very positive” or “somewhat positive” first-year experience in it (54 percent reported that they had a “very positive” first-year experience). In addition, 87 percent said that they were “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with their decision to attend the program (64 percent said that they were “very satisfied” with their decision).

AN ADDITIONAL INSIGHT FROM THE FOCUS GROUP

The focus group responses underscored the idea that new students typically do not know much about what graduate school will be like. Several students commented, for example, that

they had trouble articulating just how much they did not know before beginning the program.

There was uncertainty about the following: timeline requirements for completing classes; how to approach faculty; how faculty expectations for graduate students differ from their expectations for undergraduates; how to manage the course load; what type of guidance they would receive from administrators and faculty; how much competition there would be among the students; how to obtain funding from the program and how, by extension, to negotiate the graduate school experience without university funding; how to meet or become part of a graduate student social network; and what their employment prospects would be like upon graduation. Their comments highlighted the importance of providing information about diverse aspects of graduate school.

RECOMMENDATION FOR IMPROVING THE GRADUATE STUDENT ORIENTATION

The study respondents identified many ways that the graduate student orientation could be improved. These ranged from “major” recommendations, such as eliminating the session on study abroad opportunities and more clearly differentiating when information applied only to master’s degree students and when it applied only to doctoral students, to “minor” ones, such as sending students, prior to orientation, a map of where to park when they arrive on campus. The bulk of suggestions consisted of the latter type. For example, students recommended instructing student panelists to provide a more balanced depiction of graduate student life. They suggested creating a social media page where new students could communicate with each other, and perhaps with current students, prior to orientation. They emphasized the risk of information overload and so the need to ensure that breaks occurred more frequently. Students also suggested that the program offer faculty-student events after the orientation so that students could meet more of the faculty as well as other graduate students.

CONCLUSION

Graduate programs in criminology and criminal justice seek to create positive educational

experiences for students in ways that contribute to their intellectual and professional growth. Even so, the pursuit of a master's degree or doctoral degree entails significant challenges that go well beyond those encountered in undergraduate studies. Students are expected to be more independent, to read and write more, and to acquire familiarity with a large body of criminological and criminal justice theory and research (Kraska, 2006). To succeed, they need to understand the normative expectations of the discipline and the program and to act accordingly (Gardner, 2008; Weidman et al., 2001). At the same time, they may face financial insecurity and be uncertain about the career path that will best suit them.

These and other challenges can derail a positive graduate school experience. In turn, they highlight the need for programs to take steps to assist students, especially during students' initial transition into graduate school. First impressions matter; they "frame" how a person views and experiences subsequent events (Kahneman, 2011). They can result in positive or negative views and experiences depending on their content. A student who feels overwhelmed and unsupported may decide to drop out even though he or she might fare well in the program. Conversely, students who show great potential may act unprofessionally or in ways that reduce faculty willingness to "go the extra mile" with them. Even so, little is known about how criminology and criminal justice programs can improve the initial transition of graduate students and, in turn, the trajectory of these students throughout graduate school.

Accordingly, the goals of this study were to describe one criminology and criminal justice program's novel approach—a student-led orientation—to improving the transition of new graduate students, and to present the results of a formative and summative process evaluation of the orientation. Led by two graduate students, with oversight by a faculty member, the orientation entailed the following: correspondence with new students before they arrived on campus; sending them information about the area, program, and university; conducting a one-day orientation on campus; and providing support to students throughout their first year.

Results of the evaluation can be summarized briefly. First, new students thought that the orientation was well-implemented and that it was helpful to them during their first year in the

program. They felt welcomed, supported, and that the information that they received assisted them in making better decisions. They also emphasized that the transition to graduate school indeed is fraught with uncertainty, thus reinforcing the logic of providing them with support and information during this transition. Not least, most students reported that they felt good about their decision to enter the program. Second, they also identified many ways in which the orientation could be more effective. They suggested, for example, eliminating one session, adding more breaks, and providing clearer instructions to presenters and panelists.

From a summative evaluation perspective, the orientation appears to have been largely successful. At the same time, from a formative evaluation perspective, the study identified many ways to improve the orientation. Most of the students' recommendations could be readily adopted. The orientation leaders summarized these recommendations. Then the new graduate student leaders, who had been "in training" the previous fall, immediately began introducing changes to the design of the orientation for the next cohort of students. For example, they began developing written instructions for session panelists, creating "reminder" lists of points to emphasize in certain sessions, discussing with the program Director the possibility of faculty-student events in the fall, and identifying ways to ensure that master's degree and doctoral degree students received information and guidance specific to their respective graduate program tracks. Typically, some master's degree track students decide that they want to go on to the doctoral program, while some doctoral degree track students decide that they prefer to stop with the master's degree. The orientation therefore addressed both groups of students together. Even so, greater emphasis on track-specific information and guidance clearly was needed.

An indirect, but nonetheless intended, potential benefit of the orientation involved the training of current graduate students in evaluation research and in developing their professional skills. As with any organization, success in graduate school and beyond requires the acquisition of certain skill sets. It also requires that individuals become professionals, learning how to manage projects in a timely and competent manner and to interact with others, including faculty and administrators, in appropriate ways. The study provided no direct assessment of the extent

to which student leaders acquired new research skills or developed professionally. The logic of the orientation, however, encourages such growth by having graduate students lead and evaluate it. By extension, new students can learn more about research and professionalization through participation in a student-run orientation that is evaluated by current, more “senior” students.

Several implications of this study can be identified. First, student-led orientations constitute one potentially promising avenue that criminology and criminal justice programs might want to consider as an approach for improving graduate student experiences and success. They do not need to be costly and yet may return significant dividends.

Second, that said, research is needed that investigates whether student-led orientations indeed lead to improved transitions and graduate school experiences. Student responses to the survey suggest that the orientation was helpful to them. However, a limitation of this study is that no control group existed; as a result, claims about the causal impact of the orientation on student transitions and outcomes should be viewed with caution. Ideally, future studies will rely on experimental designs or the use of a pre-intervention and post-intervention designs, such as a study that collects information on transition experiences and outcomes from graduate students from a pre-intervention year and from graduate students in a subsequent year in which an orientation is undertaken. A related study design is to develop knowledge questions and administer pre-orientation and post-orientation questionnaires designed to gauge how well students learn certain information. Any such approach, however, would need to be augmented by collection of information about the range of experiences throughout the first year of graduate school because the orientation seeks to improve outcomes during that transition year.

Ideally, too, studies will include objective measures of success, such as student grades and the time it takes students to complete a master’s degree or doctoral degree program. These studies should include measures of short-term success, such as the extent to which orientation participants feel welcomed and supported, make better decisions about negotiating graduate school than they otherwise would have, and act more professionally in the classroom and outside of it. They should include, too, measures of longer-term success, such as the development of

collaborative research with faculty and other students, obtaining external funding or scholarships, and securing desired employment in academic or non-academic settings. An accumulation of studies that examine the implementation and impacts of student-led orientations will be needed to be more confident that they achieve their intended goals.

Third, and more generally, research is needed that identifies and evaluates a variety of approaches to improving graduate student transitions, experiences, and success during and after school. Program orientations constitute one potentially helpful approach, but alone are likely to be insufficient to improve student success. Other approaches—such as pairing students with faculty and student mentors, increasing funding for teaching assistantships and research assistantships, supporting student efforts to participate in conferences, workshops, and training, and fostering a supportive and active graduate student and alumni social network—exist that can contribute to this goal. Indeed, orientations and a combination of other approaches may be essential to promoting greater gains in students' intellectual and professional growth.

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Figure 1. Perceived Quality of Implementation of Graduate Student Orientation

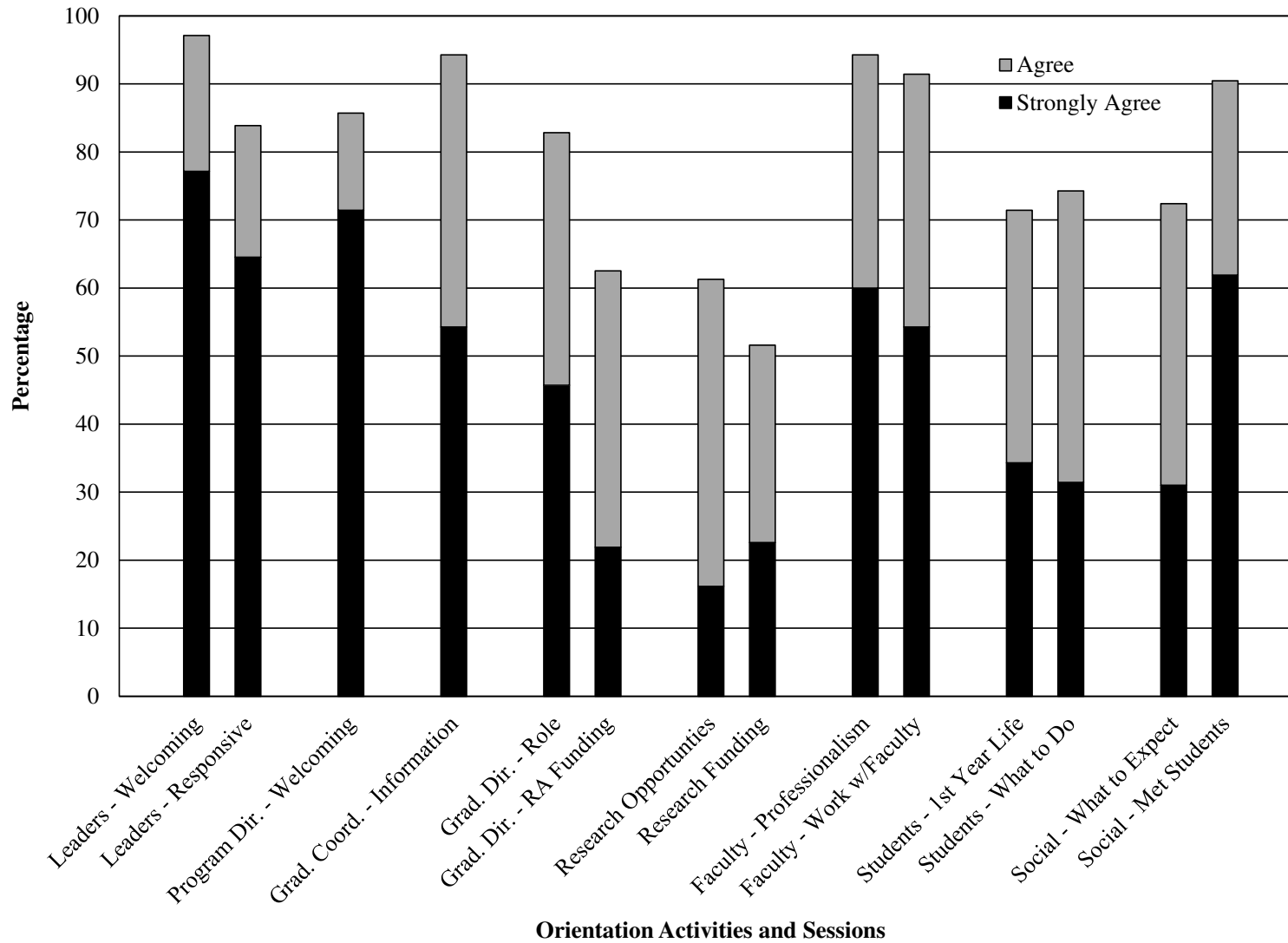


Figure 2. Perceived Effectiveness of Graduate Student Orientation

