

Idea Board: Providing Holistic Orientation to Promote Retention



Introduction:

When you think of orientation, what comes to mind? For some, it may be testing, registration, completion of forms, purchasing of textbooks, taking placement tests, etc. But these necessary activities can be categorized more as intake, rather than orientation. Think of orientation as a separate event where the goal is retention. Let's look at some of the reasons a student might not want to come back to a program:

- a. "I don't feel welcome."
- b. "I'm confused. I don't have enough information."
- c. "I'm afraid I can't succeed and I will feel embarrassed."
- d. "I don't know anybody there."
- e. "The place is so big; I don't know where to go."

I Don't Feel Welcome

How many times have we gone somewhere and felt alone and afraid? Our first reaction is to run out the door and hope we never have to go back. That's the way it feels to many of our students. With your citizenship and ESL staff, ask yourselves the following questions:

- a. Who first greets our students when they walk in for information about the citizenship program?
- b. Does whoever greets them do so with a smile and welcoming words? Has this person(s) been trained well enough so that he/she can answer most questions a potential student may have about the program, know which resources to provide, and know how to schedule the person for the following step?
- c. Is our orientation separate from intake? If not, what is keeping us from separating the two activities?

Once you have made the decision to provide new citizenship students with a holistic orientation to the program, consider adopting or adapting the following model:

Orientation to the Adult Citizenship Program

- a. Make sure students know through at least 2 avenues (verbal and written) all the details about when their orientation will take place, where it will take place, what they need to bring, how to get there, who can come with them—and who cannot, etc.
- b. Have greeters outside and inside the building helping students navigate their way to the registration table. The registration table is not for registering for the program, but rather

more of a sign-in sheet for the orientation. This is also where students get their name tags and any orientation materials required. The person(s) at the registration table also directs students to the orientation room.

- c. Ensure someone in the orientation room escorts students to their seats.
- d. Give a general introduction to the whole group. This is where there is a general welcome and program administrators, teachers, and volunteers are introduced. Display pictures of students in class and/or at citizenship ceremonies.
- e. Ask students to introduce themselves to the person on their right and left. (Don't put the students on the spot by having them do so in front of the entire group yet.)
- f. Talk about the citizenship process, what they will learn, and what support services they will receive or can receive.
- g. Have a former student(s) who became a citizen talk about his or her experiences.
- h. If possible, have someone from USCIS, such as a Community Relations Officer, deliver a welcome and talk about the naturalization process. This gives it a very human face.
- i. Assign students group numbers or colors and ask them to meet in small groups. Assign a staff person or volunteer to each group. Do a small group activity.
- j. While still in the small groups, give a tour of the facilities.
- k. Return to a whole group setting and talk about specifics of the program step-by-step. Include information about policies such as attendance, children in class, food and beverages, assessments they will take, etc.
- l. Take a break and play a game such as ice-breaker bingo to help students get to know one another.
- m. Consider assigning groups of students with peer or volunteer mentors to serve as buddies during their time with the program during the first semester.
- n. Finish the orientation by completing goal sheets, providing written and verbal instructions about where and when to go for the intake process, signing expectations contracts, and giving last words of encouragement.

I'm Confused/Don't Have Enough Information:

Think about the many questions potential students may have about your program. You should have written information in simple English or in a variety of target languages that answers all of their questions. Staff should be trained in how to answer these questions. Make sure your program fliers and other informational sheets include at a minimum the following information:

- a. General information about the purpose of your program.
- b. The address of the program, phone numbers, websites, etc.

- c. Exactly where to go for orientation, including directions, where to park, where to go once parked, who may not attend.
- d. The orientation agenda.
- e. Class session schedules.
- f. The contact information of specific staff if they have questions or need help.

I'm Afraid I Can't Succeed and I Will Feel Embarrassed

Use orientation to:

- a. Reassure students that others just like them have also been afraid, but have succeeded.
- b. Have former students give personal testimonies.
- c. Show the current pass rate on the naturalization test—91%.
- d. Show videos and photos of students learning in classrooms and celebrating at naturalization ceremonies.
- e. Demonstrate what students already know through simple classroom activities and games.

I Don't Know Anybody There

It is important to help students start making friends and getting to know familiar faces and names from the very beginning. You can speed up the process through the following:

- a. Your fliers might include the names and faces of some key ESL staff members. Perhaps even include some basic words of encouragement from these staff members.
- b. Use orientation, and even intake to allow students to get to know one another. Especially during orientation, use ice breakers and other grouping activities to begin allowing students to bond with one another.
- c. Assign peer mentors or volunteer mentors during orientation.
- d. With students' written permission, create a class directory with photos of each student and a story written by the student.
- e. Encourage students to wear name tags for the first few classes.
- f. Make table tent names for desks.

The Place Is So Big; I Don't Know Where to Go

- a. Include directions to your facility and a map showing where to park and where to go once inside the building.
- b. Give a tour of the building during orientation.
- c. Provide lots of signage throughout the building.