

Applying Values and Lifestyles Psychographics to Parental Involvement in College and University Orientation

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The authors suggest that college and university planners and advisors shift from a student-centered to a parent/student-centered freshman orientation. Planning significant events for parents not only improves the quality of orientation but also offers excellent public relations opportunities. While careful orientation for students will enhance adjustment to college life, a good orientation for parents will benefit parents, students, and the school. By applying a psychographic typology known as Values and Lifestyles (VALS), schools can create a choice of activities attractive to parents from different market segments. Increased student retention will be a major benefit.

For parents as well as students, the freshman year is a rite of passage. In the four years to come, at no time will parental interest in the educational institution be likely to be as intense as it is during orientation for the freshman year. At no other time will the educational institution have as good a chance to secure the solid parental backing so critical to student retention and academic success.

Orientation is the beginning of college reality. For parents, the upcoming absence of a college-bound child is a vacuum into which rushes pent-up love and concern, and it is in this anxious state of mind that they bring their children to our schools. Too often during freshman orientation, we ignore the needs and even the presence of parents in our efforts to advise and orient their offspring.

Our reasoning, of course, is this: if the students are happily settled, the parents will be content.

But "happy" is not easy to arrange or assess. Boyer (1987) reveals that parental influence is the pivotal factor in college choice in 51% of the cases. In families where parents did *not* attend college, parental influence rises to 54%.

There is no reason to suppose this influence ceases when the student finally arrives on campus. It may even increase, considering the fact that the freshman's next most important group of **influentials**, high school friends (Boyer, 1987), is no longer at hand. During the critical first hours of orientation, a host of impressions must be sorted through and a host of decisions

made. Yet both freshmen and parents must approach the campus without supporting peers or personal experiences to guide them.

This paper addresses that time of vulnerability as a marketing opportunity and suggests using a marketing segmentation strategy known as Values and Lifestyles (VALS) to include parents in freshman orientation in new and individualized ways.

Why Parents Provide Ideal Channels for Public Relations

For better or for worse, each parent returns home from orientation as your ambassador. Each parent "participates" in your freshman orientation, invited or not, present or not. Such a captive audience is the perfect vehicle for good public relations.

Credibility Is Higher

Publicity has enhanced value when it flows through natural channels of interest. Closer attention is paid to the message, and believability is increased. In this case, parents of freshmen are the natural channels for information about your university or college. A spontaneous favorable comment from a parent returning home carries more weight than an advertisement in the newspaper or a poster at a high school recruiting fair. The parent knows your school firsthand.

Cost Is Lower

Publicity is also less costly when it flows through natural channels rather than mass media. Advertising and public relations people constantly strive for efficient message delivery. This means delivering a message primarily or solely to potential customers, with little or no time, effort, or money spent on people who are not potential customers.

Parents talk about your institution to friends who are parents, too. Those friends tend to be in the same income bracket and live the same lifestyle. Their children probably resemble your freshmen; they are the ideal target audience.

Timing Is Ideal

From a marketing standpoint, the timing of orientation is nearly perfect: whether your orientation and preregistration take place during the summer or early in September, this is sufficient time to generate interest for next year's crop of applicants.

Parental Diversity

Parental expectations must be understood in designing an orientation program. Yet parents are a diverse group with varying outlooks and cannot be adequately categorized by demographics such as household income, marital status, age, and occupation. Other factors have greater impact. A useful approach is marketing strategy based on psychographics--descriptions of attitudes and self-images. VALS, a framework widely used in advertising and public relations, is a syndicated market segmentation service of SRI International, Menlo Park, California. It is the result of a series of studies linking people's self-images and aspirations with their use

of consumer products. Arnold Mitchell described these studies in his 1983 book *The Nine American Lifestyles*.

From its first full scale launch in 1978 through the present VALS III program, VALS typology has become a way of thinking in the marketing departments of some of America's most respected corporations (Graham, 1989; Rice, 1988; Salisbury, 1984; Yovovich, 1982). Even marketers who do not subscribe to VALS find it an intriguing tool for describing behavior (Graham, 1989). It is in this spirit that the original nine VALS categories (VALS I) are used here. It is our view that VALS has direct application to freshman orientation.

Table 1 depicts the nine American lifestyles of the VALS program. American adults are first ranked by income level. Those with low incomes, whose purchase decisions and outlook on life are strictly need-driven, are at the bottom of the diagram, and the extremely wealthy are at the top. The majority of Americans occupy the center of the diagram and are divided into two major groups: Inner-Directed and

Table 1
The Nine Values and Lifestyles Groups
(Percentages of American Adults)

<p>Achievers 20% <i>Affluent; use expensive purchases to proclaim their status</i></p> <p>Emulators 10% <i>Mobile; imitate Achievers but don't really know the rules</i></p> <p>Belongers 38% <i>Largest group of Americans; lower middle class; comfortable with tradition, family, church, and external cues for behavior</i></p>	<p>Integrations 2% <i>Very rich; combine power and social responsibility</i></p> <p>Societally Conscious 11% <i>Affluent; use money for social causes; fastest growing segment of Americans</i></p> <p>Experientials 5% <i>Liberal, very social, well educated; self-directed in decisions</i></p> <p>I-Am-Me's 3% <i>Very young, individualistic and pleasure-oriented; many are students</i></p> <p>Sustainers 7% <i>Younger Americans, struggling at the edge of poverty; tend to move into Belongers group if income improves</i></p> <p>Survivors 4% <i>Old Americans on fixed incomes; purchases are carefully budgeted and need-driven</i></p>
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Source: SRI data

Outer-Directed consumers. Outer-Directed Americans live life according to cues that come from outside themselves—family tradition and peers or external influences such as advertising and observation of other social groups. Sixty-eight percent of America's adults fall into this category (SRI, 1984).

The Inner-Directed make decisions based on their own feelings, experiences, and convictions. Developmentally, people and societies are believed to mature upward from need-driven through the split hierarchy of Outer-Directed or Inner-Directed behavior and ultimately may integrate these two behaviors (SRI, 1984).

Within these broad outlines, which owe much to the work of sociologist David Reisman and psychologist Abraham Maslow, VALS maps nine specific population segments based on product use and individual lifestyles (SRI, 1984). Each of these categories may be represented by parents on your campus, and the first step in generating activities that appeal to these groups is to decide which types are present among your parent constituency. While custom VALS analysis is available for a fee (SRI, 1984), we believe university planners can apply VALS intuitively, once each category is described. (The descriptions that follow are based on literature from SRI International [SRI, 1984] and other sources as noted.)

The Survivors and Sustainers

At the bottom of the economic ladder are Survivors (4% of the adult population), generally older Americans living on fixed incomes, and Sustainers (7%), a younger group struggling at the edge of poverty. Moving up from this income level, Americans typically become Belongers.

The Belongers

This is the largest single market category (38% of the population) in the United States. Belongers will probably be underrepresented in your parent population, but this group's sheer size means you will have Belonger parents. Only 7% are college graduates themselves. Belongers are comfortable, lower middle class Americans who believe in home, family, and the American way (Mitchell, 1983). They like doing things together. They are content to be who they are, where they are. They don't want to be different.

They want to fit in. Belonger parents might be highly likely to be found at state universities, especially those with strong athletic traditions.

The Emulators

Emulators (10% of the population) are not content in the way Belongers are. They want more of life, for themselves and for their children, though they may not know how to reach their goals. They can be critical, impatient, and nervous. Many view themselves as coming from the wrong side of the tracks but also as being upwardly mobile. Twenty-five percent have some college education (Mitchell, 1983), and their children may be the first generation to graduate from college.

Their children are more often the first generation of the family to go to college at all. While Belongers cling to the status quo, Emulators strive for direction and purpose and will expect college to reinforce these values in their children. Of all the groups, the Emulators are probably most vulnerable to media advertising.

The Achievers

Particularly on wealthier campuses, many parents may be Achievers. Achievers are competitive, monied, and not afraid to show it. Twenty-seven percent have attended college and 18% are college graduates (Mitchell, 1983). These Outer-Directed, upper middle class people constitute 20% of America's adults and are the ultimate in the American consumer dream. Psychologically, they are well adjusted. They know who they are; they are administrators, presidents, CEOs, and community leaders. They can lead public opinion about your school.

There are some Achievers in every campus hierarchy, and there will be many of them in the Alumni Club. This group is influenced by a school's reputation and may see high tuition or Ivy League labels as indicators of academic excellence. Because they find status important, they will expect special treatment from you. They will also expect the school to be an Achiever in its specialties. Affluent Achievers are more likely than the general population to give to any worthy cause ("VALS the United Way," 1986), and if they are pleased with their children's education, they will display their connections to you as yet another symbol of the good life.

The I-Am-Me's

The lowest income level of the Inner-Directed is a small (3% of the population) group SRI calls the I-Am-Me's. Most are under 25, and 44% are students themselves (Mitchell, 1983).

The Experientials

The Experientials, about 5% of the population, are liberal, social, and highly Inner-Directed. There will be only a few Experientials among your parents: their median age is twenty-seven, and 28% are single. Experientials base their decisions on direct experience rather than things they are told. In education they are second only to the next group, the Societally Conscious (38% are college graduates).

The Societally Conscious

The Societally Conscious, while only 11% of the population, are the fastest-growing segment in the VALS typology (Meyers, 1984). They have expanded Inner-Directed thinking from individuality to an awareness of self within a larger society and a sense of obligation toward society. They will expect your institution to share this world view, to be international in its thinking, and to be sensitive to environmental concerns. They want to know what is happening at the edge of knowledge and how it will shape the future.

Though this group has wealth, it tends to display it **inconspicuously**. However, the Societally Conscious "exceed national averages in giving to educational institutions . . . and they are twice as likely as the general population to work as volunteers or in fund-raising campaigns" ("VALS the United Way," 1986).

Societally Conscious parents are well educated. Fifty-eight percent have college degrees (Mitchell, 1983). They also tend to be activists. If they don't like what you are providing for their sons and daughters, they won't just grumble; they will organize to promote change or advise their children to transfer.

The Integrateds

The VALS topology is crowned by the 2% of wealthy adults whose personalities comfortably combine power and sensitivity. An Integrated could sit as the head of your board of trustees or quietly serve as an advisor to your president. These people have a sense of what is ultimately

the right course of action. They will want to understand the forces that affect education at your institution. They will be enormously effective if they choose to help.

Recommendations

Orientation should involve each of the VALS segments. Rather than worrying about how to identify parents by VALS groups, simply describe each event from VALS viewpoints ("If you'd like to make connections with other parents, . . ." "If you are concerned with environmental problems, . . ." "Ever wonder what dormitory life is like?"). Parents can self-select into VALS groups, choosing activities that appeal to them. Some events may appeal to more than one VALS segment, but the **planner/evaluator** should be aware that different segments may have differing expectations and reactions.

Establish Familiarity With the Institution

1. Make orientation an overnight experience. Offer rooms in the dormitory for **Belonger** and Experiential parents and siblings. For Achievers and Emulators, reserve a block of rooms at a nearby motel. Give Societally Conscious parents a chance to stay in professors' homes; offer a list of names and let them choose the professor by discipline.

2. Send information about orientation to parents as well as students, and send detailed maps and schedules to parents so they understand before they arrive that there are events planned especially for them. Describe living arrangements, seminars, lectures, and social activities in some detail, and write these descriptions in terms of VALS psychographics. While **Belonger** parents may not mind having each event announced as it happens, Achievers are used to being in control of their time, and Emulators in particular will want to select which meetings will have the most payoff.

This mailing can be addressed "To the Significant Adults in the Life of (Student's Name)" if parent names are unknown.

3. Have parents sign in on a personal computer when they arrive for orientation. Software such as **WordPerfect** can sort these sign-in lists by keywords such as hometown, student's dorm, and parental occupation or interests. Sort, print, and post these lists hourly so people can identify and locate possible neighbors or peers. Keeping track of parents in such an individualized way

will establish credibility for your computer-run registration process.

4. Put signs up everywhere. Don't expect the Inner Directed to be comfortable being led from place to place.

Explain Educational Processes and Goals

1. Let the Integrateds and Achievers do what they do best: let them tell you how to run things. Offer a special seminar on problems now facing the school, and invite them to help your Vice Presidents problem-solve. Only a few people will attend, but they will be the do-ers and leaders.

2. Invite the Societally Conscious and Experiential to play computer simulations in ecology, economics, and world affairs. Immerse them in the most sophisticated learning techniques you offer, from language labs to computer-aided-design. Throw these people into actual learning environments, and do not be afraid to give them brief assigned readings in advance. The idea is to demonstrate how higher education has changed since they experienced it. If they go home intellectually stimulated, they can assume their children will be equally challenged.

3. Take the Emulators backstage and show them how the university works: the archives and listening center in the library, the greenhouses and electron microscopes and other equipment, the processes of class scheduling or investment management will reveal to them the scope of your institution.

4. Let all parents see—and even take—a portion of your placement tests. Take the time to explain what scores mean. Placement exams are high-stress areas for students; help parents understand why such tests are used.

5. Mini-lectures from popular courses can showcase some of your best professors and stimulate parents to enroll in lifelong learning. Rather than describing courses, such lectures should be a vivid cross-section of actual course content.

Build Trust

1. "A day in the life of a student" as a simple video or student-produced play can take a parent inside the daily life of your institution with authentic detail.

2. Emulators will enjoy a fashion show by senior students or a tour of your president's home.

3. The freshman has a lot to absorb during orientation. Let parents act as a memory bank and conduit for information about special opportunities, such as study abroad, intramural sports, or social clubs.

4. Experimentals and Achievers might enjoy role-playing. Counselors can demonstrate the challenges freshmen face by having parents play student roles in mini-sketches.

5. Offer parents a reading list of popular books on subjects or theories freshmen will encounter in classes. Parallel learning takes away some of the threat that college will estrange children.

6. Invite parents to visit with professors in their homes. If you can underwrite the cost of small afternoon coffees or brunches, you can put parents face-to-face with professors in impressive ways.

7. Spotlight some of your important alumni at orientation. All VALS segments will find this interesting. Either in person, or through a series of posters or a newsletter, alumni can model the best results of the education you have to offer.

8. Do as much asking as you do telling. Ask parents what their concerns are and what they want their children to learn. Your inquiries can take the form of questionnaires (for Belongers), interviews (with Emulators), **lecture/discussion** (for Achievers), and seminars (for Societally Conscious).

Make the Experience Worthwhile for All

1. Send people home with some tangible evidence of their attendance. Whether it is a button or a reading list, the idea should be to keep parents talking about the orientation experience.

2. Give students and parents ample opportunity to say good-bye. Anticipate the several times when parents might have to leave, and keep the schedule open at those points.

3. Send parents home with a small calendar of upcoming school events and important telephone numbers. Fill-in blanks for the student's postbox, dormitory room number, telephone, and roommate's name should be part of this take-along piece. Consider creating special parent-grams, which can be delivered a day or so after parting, if the orientation is in September. In the summer, parents can sign a good luck banner to be posted in the dining hall that fall.

4. Remember that during orientation stu-

dents and parents can absorb very little factual information and will have time to do almost no reading. This is a time of impressions and feelings.

Conclusion

By using VALS psychographics to shift from a student-centered to a parent/student-centered freshman orientation, an educational institution can demonstrate to parents that it respects their individuality and understands their need to be involved. This thoughtful approach can make the institution accessible, real, and even exciting to parents; it can also contribute substantially to retention and recruitment.

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