A new approach to new-student orientation

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At most universities, new-student orientation does exactly what its practical moniker implies: It helps students find their way around — where to eat, where to buy books and where to pay the bills.

At UD, it's so much more, said Sister Annette Schmeling, R.S.C.J., vice president for student development and dean of students.

The four-day program, administered by 13 student leadership executives, includes all of the pragmatic elements of traditional programs — move-in, welcome speeches, a resource fair, meet-and-greet events and a family picnic — plus a Sunday liturgy and seven small-group dialogues on topics ranging from diversity to UD's Catholic and Marianist identity.

"We're trying to address, 'What is the essence of this University that students need to know to get the most out of their University of Dayton experience?'" Schmeling said. "It's based on three sine qua nons: Quality relationships, academic engagement and passionate purpose."

More simply put: "Open heart, open mind, open will."

Each dialogue group of 30 to 40 people will be led by what Schmeling called a family of five: a faculty member; a staff member; a peer academic leader, known as a PAL; a resident adviser; and a member of student development's "blue crew," a cadre of students who help with late-night programs, social events, move-in, welcoming and community development.

"The goal of these dialogues is to frame what is important at UD," she said. "It sets the expectations for the whole community and for themselves as individuals so that they can make the most of the college experience. Here, it's important to us to have faculty, staff and students involved because learning here happens in the context of community."

Quality relationships are the primary component, Schmeling said. Helping students understand what constitutes a quality relationship not only forms a foundation for a fulfilling life, but also helps avert insecurities and anxieties that can lead to troubled interpersonal relationships, prejudices and destructive habits such as alcohol and drug abuse.

Once a student understands and begins to build quality relationships, the effects reach beyond friendships into studies and work, Schmeling said. Maturity, commitment, self-sacrifice and hard work — all essential to quality relationships — also are essential to intellectual inquiry and fruitful academic exchange; they create an environment in which a student contributes to lessons rather than just receiving them. With the wisdom that comes from that type of exchange, a student can be more open to discerning his or her passionate purpose — calling — in meeting the needs of the world.

Really, it's more like formation than orientation, Schmeling said, adding that as far as she can tell, UD's approach is unique. The University of Denver and Willamette University in Oregon have incorporated dialogue, but it's strictly faculty-led. At UD, the "families of five" support the dialogues under the guidance of the peer academic leaders, who will have received training from noted dialogue researcher and facilitator Glenna Gerard in the days leading up to orientation, Schmeling said.

TO VOLUNTEER: New-student orientation is Aug. 16-19. Student development seeks faculty and staff to help lead the dialogues. For information, contact Sue Dempsey at 229-3331 or via e-mail.

— Maureen Schlangen