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## Peer vs. Professional: Assessing the Communicative Experience of Student Orientation Leaders

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Peer vs. Professional  
Assessing the Communicative Experience of  
Student Orientation Leaders

by

Casey M. Ford

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of Honors Requirements

May 2019



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## **Abstract**

Current literature reveals that peer-leadership is valuable and integral within institutions of higher learning. While extensive research reveals how peer-leaders benefit the overall student experience and contribute to institutional recruitment and retention, (Tinto, 2012) little research has considered the actual experience of student peer-leaders. The current study considers the communicative challenges and triumphs student orientation leaders encounter in their roles as students and university ambassadors. During a university's new student orientation, student orientation leaders function as both student leaders and university professionals; they serve as liaisons between students, their parents and families, and the university they represent, often working as the primary catalysts for students' and families' transition to college. This kind of role management creates a unique experience for student orientation leaders that tends to differ from other paraprofessionals. The current study functioned as a case study of a student orientation leader group at a mid-size southern university, including a sample of twenty students who had previously served as orientation leaders.

Keywords: orientation, college students, student affairs, role conflict, paraprofessional, peer-leader, higher education, communication accommodation theory

## **Dedication**

I dedicate my thesis to my family and close friends who have supported me throughout this process. Specifically, I dedicate this work to Adria Mulligan, Kayla Hubbard, and Carlee Welch-Dick. You have challenged me, supported me, pushed me to be the student, friend, and person I am today. When I think of my college experience, of my professional future, and of my dearest friends, I think of you. I would also like to dedicate my thesis to The University of Southern Mississippi. I believe students, faculty, and staff all benefit from the unique experience offered at Southern Miss, and I hope my research contributes to that experience.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CAT	Communication Accommodation Theory
SPT	Social Penetration Theory
UMT	Uncertainty Management Theory
NODA	National Orientation Directors Association

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Consistent with current trends in higher education is the value of peer-leadership in institutions of higher learning. As Steven Ender explains, peer-leaders are “students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers. These services are intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence of students toward attainment of their educational goals,” (1984, p. 324). Jamie L. Shook & Jennifer R. Keup classify a peer-leader as “a person who shares a defining student characteristic; similar background; or common educational pathway, challenge, or experience,” employed to model the way as those who have had a “slightly advanced” experience of what their peers are going through (Shook & Keup, 2012, p.7).

In higher education, “most student development theories attribute great significance to the process of maturation in interpersonal relationships and the impact of peers in this process,” (Shook & Keup, 2012, p. 5). Peer-leader roles, including peer-tutors, resident assistants, learning assistants, small group facilitators, and fraternity and sorority life recruitment counselors play a vital role in the development and integration of many student populations into the university, including first-year and transfer students, academically at-risk students, foreign exchange students, and new members of a campus organization.

Peer-leaders are integral to the health and success of institutions of higher learning. Specifically, peer-leaders can serve as the “single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (Astin, 1993, para. 13). Additionally, serving in a peer-leader role is also beneficial to the students involved in those positions; they often gain leadership experience, help develop and mentor other

students, and glean “educational and personal benefits, including greater awareness of the campus community, an enhanced sense of belonging, and meaningful interpersonal relationships within that institutional environment” (Shook & Keup, 2012, p. 10).

### **Peer-leaders in Higher Education**

While extensive research reveals how peer-leaders benefit the overall student experience while contributing to institutional recruitment and retention (Tinto, 2012), little research has considered the actual experience of student peer-leaders. Because of the professional role(s) these students play for a university, they are considered “para-professionals.” Ender (1984) defines paraprofessionals as “students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers...these services are intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence of students toward attainment of their educational goals” (1984, p. 324).

In new student orientation events, orientation leaders function as both student leaders and university professionals; they serve as liaisons between incoming students, their parents and families, and the university they represent, often working as the primary catalysts for students’ and families’ transition to college.

Research around orientation programs suggest these student leaders contribute to “increased satisfaction, persistence and retention, social development, and academic performance” for new students as they adjust to college student life (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012, p.17). They assist their supervisors and other campus professionals in conducting a successful orientation experience for each attendee of each session. Orientation leaders are often tasked with ensuring proper communication between the university and

incoming students, the families of incoming students, and between faculty and staff involved in orientation programming.

Ideally, student orientation leaders foster relationships with incoming first year and transfer students while also meeting the needs of parents and family members; given these extensive responsibilities, student orientation leaders seem to serve in very similar professional capacities as full-time university staff members. They are held to standards perhaps considered higher than those of student leaders in other organizations or leadership roles due to their unique responsibilities to several groups of people.

This type of role management contributes to a distinct experience for student orientation leaders that differs substantially from other paraprofessionals at the university. The focus of the current study is the analysis of specific communicative challenges and triumphs student orientation leaders encounter in their role as student leaders and university ambassadors.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

There are several theoretical frameworks that contribute to our understanding of an orientation leader's communicative experience. Orientation leaders are expected to accommodate and help manage the needs of students, family members, campus partners, and other professionals with whom they work on a regular basis. This multifaceted nature often requires these individuals to approach their responsibilities from many different roles within their overarching role of student orientation leader.

### **Role Theory**

Role theory, initially developed by George Herbert Mead, asserts that we are situational beings and presumes “that persons are members of social positions and hold expectations for their own behaviors and those of other persons” (Biddle, 1986, p. 67). Biddle asserts that people “behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on their respective social identities and the situation” (p. 2), a pattern easily identified in student orientation leader experiences. While these individuals hold the social position of “orientation leader” and “university ambassador,” this perceived identity is not necessarily shared in the same ways with everyone with whom they interact; consequently, different expectations for behavior are placed on them.

Ledford, Canzona, and Cafferty (2015) contextualize role theory in patient-physician relationships. The scholars claim that as with any other interaction between two people, “behaviors are violated or validated based on the expected role” of each person (2015, p. 31). The patient-physician dynamic can be compared in some ways to that between an orientation leader and a new student or family member; an orientation leader is tasked with meeting the needs and expectations of those who attend each session

depending on the “environmental script” (p. 31) or specific circumstances and contributing factors of each interaction. This study gives examples of the ways physicians employ gestures, body orientation, eye contact, and other nonverbal communication to achieve higher patient satisfaction and claims practitioners must determine when, during medical interactions, to communicate in these ways (Ledford, et.al. 2015). Further, Ledford et. al. include these behaviors in only one of “multiple roles in medical interactions” (2015, p. 31) for practitioners, as they are often tasked with providing both the socioemotional support for patients as well as the medical care itself.

Equally important as a new student’s knowledge of important campus buildings, operating hours for dining facilities, and common practices and procedures, is their feeling safe and secure at a new place. As higher education literature suggests, “helping students adjust emotionally to college life is a goal of orientation. If they feel connected to the institution and to one another, they will do better” (Masterson, 2019, para 4). Consequently, it is the role of an orientation leader to provide both the information and the sense of security, and to know when and how to provide which.

Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964) explore concepts of role conflict and ambiguity within organizations, insisting the necessity for each member of a group to know and perform his or her role well so the organization can succeed. They assert “the more complex and specialized the organization becomes, the greater becomes the degree of interdependence and the need for conformity to the requirements of organizational role” (Kahn et. al., 1964, p. 1-2). Because an orientation leader serves students, parents and families, professional staff members, and other orientation leaders themselves, he or she is part of a complex organizational environment, or “array of

formal organizations, groups, and relationships” (Kahn et. al., 1964, p. 2-2) and therefore is subjected to a more complex psychological environment as well. Because those people “have a stake in [the member’s] performance, they develop beliefs and attitudes about what he should and should not do as his role,” from assuring an out-of-state family member her student will be safe, inspiring excitement in an unamused transfer student, or mediating a conflict between two academic advisors. As Kahn et. al. describe, those expectations are multi-faceted.

They may deal with what the person should do, what kind of person he should be, what he should think or believe, and how he should relate to others. They are by no means restricted to the "job description" as it might be given by the head of the organization or prepared .by some specialist in personnel. (1964, p. 2-5)

Student orientation leaders must learn to fulfill these roles, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit. Often, they must do so effortlessly, or at least appear as such, so to not hinder the “physical and emotional state” (Kahn et. al. 1964, p. 2-1) of themselves or others throughout their time in the role.

Organizational role theory is concerned with various roles in formal organizations (p. 73) and how particular contexts affect members of a group. Biddle considers these roles to also be “associated with identified social positions and to be generated by normative expectations.” However, Biddle is quick to point out that the norms “vary among individuals and may reflect both the official demands of the organizations and the pressures of informal groups” (p. 73). Biddle (1986) suggests the following about individuals in this environment:



Given multiple sources for norms, individuals are often subjected to role conflicts in which they must contend with antithetical norms for their behavior. Such role conflicts produce strain and must be resolved if the individual is to be happy and the organization is to prosper. (p. 73)

Student orientation leader teams function within the university organization in many ways. Student orientation leaders can, at times, experience role conflict because they must adhere to expectations from different sources within the university. While there may be “official” expectations communicated initially from direct supervisors, other expectations come from new students, parents and family members, and other university professionals. Further, certain settings involving teammates or supervisors are considered “informal” as compared to a formal orientation session itself; these informal interactions may establish “antithetical norms” for these student leaders to manage as they navigate their role throughout each specific context. Because orientation leaders often begin their roles in the semester prior to the summer, and because they do not work every single day of the summer, there are ample opportunities for them to encounter team members and supervisors outside of work. While these interactions are common, they often exist in social settings and can elicit different expectations for behavior than standards of professional communication typically expected at actual orientation sessions.

Wehner and Thies (2014) conceptualize roles as positions of power and influence recognized in social groups, a framework which can be applied to student orientation leaders as well, considering their ability to influence the experience of new students and families. Wehner and Thies also suggest that as individuals encounter conflict or varying expectations, they “expect roles to change or to be adapted and adjusted” depending on

the situation at hand and what they have been taught and trained to do (Wehner & Thies, 2014, p. 417). Throughout orientation sessions, student orientation leaders must learn to be adaptable to meet the demands and potential conflicts of the job.

As Biddle (1986) suggests, student orientation leaders, acting as both as peer-leaders and paraprofessionals, must work to provide a successful orientation experience for students and family members while also finding their leadership role personally fulfilling. To achieve both, student leaders must learn to anticipate and resolve any role conflict-induced stress and strain.

### **Communication Accommodation Theory**

Consistent with the idea that individuals approach their work based on varying roles, student orientation leaders often make adjustments specific to their communication with others. Established in 1984 by Howard Giles, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) essentially explains the way we change our speech, language, and nonverbal communication based on the person or group of people with whom we are communicating. Specifically, we make these adjustments to create, maintain, or decrease social distance in interaction (Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 293) and often “to gain approval from one another” (p. 296). Gallois, Watson, & Giles (2018) speak to CAT in the context of intergroup relations, claiming “individuals can engage in communication practices that emphasize or attenuate group differences and thereby dynamically harden or soften intergroup boundaries” (Gallois et al., 2018, p. 312). Ayoko, Härtel, and Callan explore the role of CAT in managing conflict between members of culturally diverse groups at work. Ayoko et. al. claim that when members checked their understanding and that of

their coworkers, they were better able to engage in positive, productive conflict and better able to anticipate future interactions with one another (Ayoko, et. al., 2018, 193).

On a typical day, orientation leaders interact with multiple populations of people with different needs and priorities. To be successful, orientation leaders must modify their interaction in ways that best suit different populations and manage the appropriate social interactions with them. The concepts of convergence and divergence are central to CAT, and they refer to our approaches to communication with others. Whereas convergence refers to interactants tendency to “adapt their communicative behaviors in such a way as to become more similar to their interlocutor’s behavior” (p. 295), divergence “leads to an accentuation of speech and nonverbal differences between self and the other” (p. 295), creating an opposite effect. Giles and Ogay claim the following effects of convergence:

Converging to a common linguistic style also improves the effectiveness of communication, this, in turn, has been associated with increased predictability of the other and hence a lowering of uncertainty, interpersonal anxiety, and mutual understanding. (p. 295)

Within an orientation setting, student orientation leaders must learn to converge their communication style to create liking and identification between themselves and new students and their family members. Similarly, they should identify times where it might be helpful to converge or diverge their communication to that of a supervisor to establish a normal pattern of interaction at work. For the sake of their experience as team members, orientation leaders may be encouraged to converge communication styles to that of each other to reach a “mutual understanding” of the work ahead of them, to appear

as a united front for students and family members, and to have a more positive experience of the student orientation leader role together (Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 295).

Gasiorek (2015) considers the importance of perspective-taking in our ability to manage nonaccommodative communication from others. She states, “engaging in perspective-taking can influence how we explain others’ problematic behavior” (2015, p. 578), and further claims that “when we imagine ourselves in a target’s position, and that target is engaging in behavior that is inconsistent with our values, we adjust our attributions to their behavior to reduce the cognitive dissonance in this inconsistency” (2015, p. 578). In a later piece, Gasiorek, along with Giles (2015) suggests nonaccommodative communication can be understood using the inferences others make about us, and whether they perceive us to be positively or negatively motivated (Gasiorek & Giles, 2015).

Because the transition to college can be a stressful time for students and their families, those attending orientation sessions are not always the most agreeable or the most accommodating individuals. Orientation leaders must approach each session with the expectation that new students, parents and family members, and campus professionals are coming with their own perspectives and attitudes. When orientation leaders take the perspectives of fearful, flustered family members, they can more effectively understand and respond to potentially rude or angry comments that orientation leaders might otherwise take personally. When they consider the emotions and thoughts which might be fueling the non-accommodating responses, orientation leaders are better positioned to professionally diffuse tension through by relating more closely to others.

Further, when orientation leaders are able to gauge the extent to which new students and family members perceive them as “intending to be helpful,” and the extent to which they assume orientation leaders to “have good intentions” (Gasiorek & Giles, 2015, p. 462) orientation leaders are better prepared to understand potential sources of nonaccommodative behavior, such as a student’s choice to remain silent in small group discussions or insist in talking out of turn.

Jones, Gallois, Barker, and Callan (1994) study the relational applications of CAT, specifically between academic instructors and students, ultimately finding the most “accommodating” students to be “polite, assertive, persistent, behaving appropriately, and clear in explanations,” while rating accommodating lecturers as “trying to see the student’s point of view, treating the student like an equal, and not talking down to the student” as well as “reasonable, polite, willing to listen, and prepared to help” (Jones, et. al., 1994, p. 169-170). Their work around accommodation, under-accommodation, and overaccommodation in this study helps structure our understanding of CAT in academic settings, as well as in dyads of varying levels of power. Interestingly, this study finds nonaccommodative behavior to be “perceived less negatively when it adheres to social rules about appropriate behaviors than when it is rule-violating” (Jones, et. al. 1994, p.161), based on examples like that between a lecturer who overaccommodates by offering extra help and making a point to give particularly clear instructions to a student.

Not dissimilar from the power dynamic explored between lecturer and student is that between a student orientation leader and his or her supervisor. When roles are compared of an orientation leader as a student and a supervisor as academic instructor, the findings of Jones et. al. suggest a tendency of both communicators to have an

inclination toward accommodation (Jones, et. al. 1994), both “trying to see the point of view” of the other, seeking “common ground,” and following “social rules about appropriate behavior” (Jones, et. al., 1994, p. 168). As they navigate their working relationships with those in positions of authority over them, orientation leaders learn to accommodate their communication in ways that help them gain an appropriate amount of “interpersonal control” (Jones, et. al. 1994, p. 169) within supervisor interactions, “to gain approval from one another (Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 296), and to soften boundaries (Gallois, et. al., 2018) that may come with their supervisor-student leader relationship.

### **Uncertainty Management Theory**

While these unique roles often breed uncertainty and ambiguity for peer-leaders themselves, one of their primary goals as orientation leaders is to assist students and their families in managing *their* uncertainty concerning the transition to college. Rains and Tukachinsky (2015) define uncertainty as when the “details of situations are ambiguous, complex, unpredictable or probabilistic; when information is unavailable or inconsistent and when people feel insecure in their own state of knowledge or the state of knowledge in general” (p. 339). The scholars assert that the experience of uncertainty is not necessarily positive or negative inherently. Instead, the scholars claim, “individuals appraise uncertainty for meaning, and such appraisals can motivate attempts to manage uncertainty,” including strategies like information-seeking (p. 339). Amidst the sometimes-daunting transitions to college, new students and their families often grapple with uncertainty and look to orientation leaders and other university professionals to both validate their uncertainty and provide information and advice to help them manage it.

According to the Council for Advancement of Standards for Student Services, orientation programs should “help students to understand the purpose of education and the campus they attend; provide information on campus and community services; support families; and provide students with an opportunity to meet and interact with faculty, staff, and continuing students,” (Connolly, 2010, p. 25). Consequently, an orientation leader is tasked with answering questions, providing campus resources, and calming any fears or anxieties associated with the transition to college. Posner and Rosenberger characterize the orientation leader role this way:

Throughout welcome sessions, small group meetings, academic advising, panel discussions, campus tours, and diversity and inclusion programming, orientation leaders socialize incoming students to campus life and set them up for success in college. They can make a difference in how welcome the new students feel, how they respond to their anxieties, how much fun they have during the orientation, how well their questions are answered, and how much useful information is provided. (1997, p. 47)

In many ways, the role of an orientation leader is to assist students and families in managing the uncertainty that accompanies the transitional experience to college. In considering the stresses that accompany the transition to college, Tian, Schrodt, and Carr (2016) analyze the role of uncertainty management young people’s navigation of adverse events. The scholars state, “Emerging adulthood is a unique time period in the lives of young adults as individuals often experience higher levels of uncertainty and anxiety due to emotional and economic instability and processes of identity exploration” (p. 280). The period of “emerging adulthood” certainly includes the transition to college and

consequently often leads to” decreased physical and emotional health and increased feelings of stress” (Tian et al., 2016, p. 281). Student orientation leaders are expected to maintain an awareness of those “feelings of stress” in the students and family members with whom they interact. As Thau, Bennett, Mitchell and Mars (2009) describe, uncertainty is often a negative experience for those encountering new environments as it makes them feel less in control of their circumstances. Lind & Bos (2002) corroborate these claims and add that individuals experiencing uncertainty often seek “trust-based interaction” (p. 182) to cope with that loss of control. As new students learn to “respond to their anxieties” (Posner & Rosenberger, 1997, p.47) around their college experiences, orientation leaders can provide the emotional and informational support necessary to help them do so.

In addition to providing practical information and instilling a sense of safety and security, many orientation programs aim to educate incoming first-year students on the expectations the community they are joining and some of the challenges they may encounter at orientation. This typically involves orientation leaders’ facilitation of potentially difficult conversations around issues college students may face, ranging anywhere from homesickness, political disagreements, academic integrity, mental illness, harassment, sexual assault, and hate crimes. Sorrentino, Ye, and Szeto (2009) report that people’s understanding and experience of uncertainty is affected not only through “reactions to fair and unfair events but also their responses to other events that bolster or violate their cultural worldviews” (p. 242). For some students, “events that bolster or violate their cultural worldviews” can be as simple as a small group discussion with fellow incoming students who come from a different place and hold different values than



they do. Orientation sessions provide programming that prepares new students for a realistic experience of their new campus and community, giving them the knowledge resources to be successful members of each. While they are developed and executed with intentions to help students, these orientation experiences can challenge the views and opinions of new students, sometimes adding to the uncertainty of the overall orientation experience.

Sorrentino et. al. (2009) suggest that when orientation leaders can maintain an awareness of the times when incoming students experience a “bolster(ing) or violation” of “values and worldviews,” they are better able to help students manage those events of uncertainty (p. 242). Finally, Sorrentino et. al. remind readers that “personal uncertainty can be coped with by reactions of deliberate information processing” (p. 243). In the context of orientation, these claims support the efforts of orientation programs and student orientation leaders to facilitate opportunities for reflection with their students, allowing them time and space to consider how they are experiencing new people, places, and environments. Sollitto, Brott, Cole, Gil, & Selim (2007) argue, in fact, that college students must manage uncertainty based more on socioemotional needs than anything else, as their needs for belonging and security take precedence in this period of life. In their efforts to meet those needs, they depend on others around them in that process, making UMT a social experience.

While peer leaders may not necessarily have the capability to entirely reduce the uncertainty that comes with the transition to college, orientation leaders have the responsibility to help students and their families manage that uncertainty and help families leave orientation sessions feeling better equipped to move forward in that transition.

## **Social Penetration Theory**

**Communication with incoming students.** As orientation leaders help students and their families navigate the uncertainty that often comes with new student orientation, part of their position requires that they initiate a progressive relationship with the incoming students and their families. Current research around successful orientation programs affirm part of that success lies in their commitment to “help(ing) students establish early personal contacts with other members of the college community,” as it “promote(s) students’ social integration, which in turn, will promote their retention” (Cuseo, 2015, p. 1). Based on Cuseo’s claims, orientation leaders serve as role models who have done this all before and here to explain how to new students.

Student development theory asserts “students’ values, beliefs, and aspirations change in the direction of the dominant values, beliefs, and aspirations of other students” (Astin, 1993, p. 75) therefore making relationships with other students a crucial part of new students’ development of “values, beliefs, and aspirations” (p. 75). Orientation leaders offer their own core principles and those of the institution as an example to new students.

As Timothy Urdan suggests, social relationships and “perceived pressure from friends to do well (or not do well) academically” are a significant factor in students’ motivation to pursue successful student experiences (Urdan, 1997, p. 167). Because orientation is the beginning of that experience, student orientation leaders are tasked with being some of the first initiators of those social relationships and, ideally, help new students to start off on the right foot, with the knowledge and the willingness to make good choices for themselves (Urdan, 1997). Contributors to the National Orientation

Directors Association assert that “faculty, staff, and students who work with orientation and transition programs should provide ample formal and informal opportunities for students to begin to develop these relationships (Norris & Mounts, 2010).

Their time together, though relatively short, is spent developing a relationship very different from the one that exists when students and families first meet orientation leaders at check-in. The communicative process of developing relationships can be characterized by Social Penetration Theory (SPT), or the “process of bonding that moves a relationship from superficial to more intimate” (Carpenter & Greene, 2016, p. 1). Commonly referred the “onion model,” (SPT) is concerned with self-disclosure, as people in relationships must “peel back others’ layers of personal information through interpersonal interaction to reach the core” (Carpenter & Greene, 2016, p. 1). Much of an orientation leader’s job revolves around his or her ability to connect with students and develop a relationship built on trust. (Lind & Bos, 2012). However, before orientation leaders can help incoming students realize that college can be a significant and positive experience, they must convince them that the actual orientation session can be a significant and positive experience, as this type of conversation typically happens in their initial interactions (Baack, Fogliasso, & Harris, 2000). As orientation leaders strive to communicate the value of orientation to new students, orientation leaders must convince students that they themselves are trustworthy. Baack et. al. claim “these relationships change, normally becoming deeper and more trusting, as people gradually reveal themselves to one another over time” (Baack et. al., 2000, p. 39). Orientation leaders create these connections by providing information through self-disclosure, a key component of Social Penetration Theory (Carpenter & Greene, 2016, p. 2).

The key idea here on which scholars seem to agree is that both communicators are engaging in this practice; Bylunda, Peterson, and Cameron name reciprocity of self-disclosure as an important contributor to establishing trusting relationships (2012). As orientation leaders offer “deep emotions, core values and beliefs” about themselves to new students, they motivate students to share those pieces of themselves, further committing to the progression of that relationship, as they feel a “sense of obligation to repay what has been provided to them,” in the first place (Bylunda et. al., 2012, p. 265). SPT’s rule of reciprocity guides orientation leaders in their expectations of new students to engage in self-disclosure to adhere to social norms and gain a meaningful experience of orientation (Bylunda et. al., 2012).

In their work on risk in interpersonal relationships, Sheperis, Sheperis, Davis, & Mohr consider perceptions of comfort and discomfort in response to self-disclosure and its effects on therapeutic relationship between counselors and clients (2017). While Sheperis et. al. study self-disclosure in the context of a clinical setting, their findings yield significant implications for orientation leaders, as the relationships they forge with new students often mirror the “therapeutic relationships” based on empathy, unconditional positive regard, and a willingness to listen, between counselors and clients (Sheperis, 2017, p. 18). As Sheperis et. al. are careful to point out, the degree to which people feel comfortable sharing sensitive information about themselves determines their ability to move forward with communicative goals (Sheperis, 2017) and the same applies to a new student or family member’s perception of risk at an orientation session.

**Communication with other student orientation leaders.** Beyond communicating with incoming students, student orientation leaders must create positive

or close relationships with fellow student orientation leaders to ensure the success of their mission. Dunleavy and Booth-Butterfield (2009) investigate the role of idiomatic communication in self-disclosure. The scholars describe that personal idioms are aspects of communication that are specific to a certain relationship, including rituals, inside jokes, and words that have special meaning for individuals in that relationship. The scholars claim that these are “maintained throughout the relationship and have significance for those who use them” (p. 417). Further, their usage “indicates a close relationship” (p. 417).

New students’ perception of orientation leader teams is critical to their experience. Ideally, orientation leaders will have spent adequate time and disclosed adequate information about themselves in the months leading up to the start of their roles to have established close relationships with one another. This not only lends a healthier, more effective working dynamic among team members but also represents a unified front to new students and families while displaying friendships developed in college. As Knapp outlines in his model for relational development, two people enter the integrating stage when they begin to share “intimate information and secrets” and develop a mutual understanding based on what might be considered inside information by those outside the pair (Knapp, 1978). Over time, orientation leaders develop this “intimate information” among each other during orientation sessions. When they use inside jokes, nicknames for one another, or other personal idioms, Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield (2009) suggest that they appear more credible in their efforts to do the same with new students, ultimately gaining their trust, because they appear to be engaged in actual close friendships (Welch & Rubin, 2002). When new students “see themselves” in peer-leaders, they are more

inclined to engage in relationships of solidarity, or those which “include symmetry and trust... based on personal characteristics (i.e., age or attitude), but also symmetry in exchange of sentiments, behaviors, and expressions” (Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009, p. 421). Those relationships can empower new students to move forward in their orientation and transition experiences by knowing they are connected to at least one person with which they have a significant relationship.

### **Rationale**

Based on the review of literature, it is imperative to better understand the communicative experiences of student orientation leaders. Specifically, it is important to understand how they manage their communication with others, how they manage the competing roles imposed on them by the university, and how they engage in self-disclosure with incoming students and their families. With the communicative theoretical perspectives in mind, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: How do student orientation leaders manage the experience of role conflict as university paraprofessionals and as student leaders?

RQ2: How do the challenges that come with their management of multiple roles affect their communication?

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Participants

The current study functions as a case study of a student orientation leader group at a mid-size southern university. In-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with orientation leaders concerning the potential role conflicts and communicative challenges they face as paraprofessionals of the university. All participants had served as orientation leaders within the past two years. As the team is a diverse group of students, those interviewed varied in sex, age, racial ethnicity, and experience. The sample consisted of 20 student orientation leaders at the university. Fifteen were members of the 2018 team, and five were members of the 2017 team. Fourteen participants were female, and six participants were male.

Participant #	Sex	Classification	Orientation Team
1.	Male	Junior	2018
2.	Female	Senior	2018
3.	Female	Senior	2018
4.	Female	Senior	2018
5.	Female	Junior	2018
6	Female	Senior	2018
7	Female	Senior	2018
8	Female	Junior	2018
9.	Male	Junior	2018
10.	Female	Junior	2018

<b>11.</b>	Male	Senior	2018
<b>12.</b>	Female	Junior	2018
<b>13.</b>	Female	Junior	2018
<b>14.</b>	Male	Senior	2017
<b>15.</b>	Female	Senior	2018
<b>16.</b>	Male	Graduate	2017
<b>17.</b>	Female	Graduate	2017
<b>18.</b>	Male	Graduate	2017
<b>19.</b>	Female	Junior	2018
<b>20</b>	Female	Graduate	2017

Table 1

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Following institutional review board approval, recruitment letters were emailed to members of the 2017 and 2018 orientation leader teams. Potential participants were identified based on the researcher’s relationship to both the 2017 and 2018 teams. This purposive sampling provided the researcher direct access to participants with she knew had recent experience relevant to the current study.

A total of 16 interviews were conducted in-person, on campus, primarily at the campus library, while the remaining four (20%) were conducted via FaceTime at the participants’ convenience. Those interviews were conducted primarily with participants no longer living in the college town. All participants granted permission to record their interview. The researcher employed a semi-structured interview protocol to guide the in-



depth interviews. The participants were assured of their confidentiality and of the data analysis procedures which would follow. The interviews ranged from 24 to 65 minutes.

### **Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol included 17 items. Participants were asked a series of questions about their typical experience during an orientation session and the various populations with whom they communicate during these sessions. They were asked about their tasks and responsibilities as orientation leaders, their perceptions of the role itself, as well as others' perceptions of the role. They were asked to talk about their experience while actively serving as orientation leaders, as well as their experience following the conclusion of their time as an orientation leader.

Participants were also asked a series of questions concerning their dual roles of students and staff members while serving in an official capacity of the university: "Are there difficulties associated with managing your identity as a student and as a staff member?" "Does your role as a University ambassador affect the way you communicate in general?" "Do you find it important in your role to be perceived as professional?"

Participants were also asked a series of questions around their communication with teammates, supervisors, and other university professionals with whom they work during orientation sessions: "How is your interaction with new students different from your interaction with parents and families?" "Do you find that communication with fellow orientation leaders impacts your overall experience as an individual?" "How does your communication with supervisors affect your experience as an orientation leader?" "How does your communication with other university professionals affect your experience as an orientation leader?"

The researcher inquired about information concerning any challenges that accompany the student orientation leader role. Specifically, questions were posed concerning the ways students must manage multiple identities, adapt their interaction to any given context, and meet the various needs of students, family members, and professionals. A complete list of the questions asked can be found in Appendix A of this document, labeled “Research Instrument.”

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The researcher conducted and recorded interviews, transcribing and removing any identifying information to maintain participant confidentiality. In Vivo Coding, Simultaneous Coding, and Initial Coding (Saldana, 2008) were employed to analyze the data, determine categories, and develop themes from the data. The coders applied codes that had been developed based on the literature review. Additionally, coders remained open to emergent findings through inductive coding. Two coders analyzed the data. Through multiple rounds of coding, the coders categorized data based on the selected theoretical perspectives and any inductive findings that emerged from the data. Any disagreements in coding were resolved through conversation. The author of the current study then selected exemplar quotes and managed the document.

## Chapter 4: Results

From the data analysis, several themes and subthemes emerged. The first theme detailed the importance of the relationships student orientation leaders built between everyone they encountered. Relationships discussed included those with other orientation leaders, new students, parents and family members, as well as supervisors and other staff members. The second was the experience of conflict or tension orientation leaders experienced in their roles, including the ways they had to modify their behavior based on who they were interacting with in a given moment. Finally, a common theme discovered was the realization of orientation leaders in gaining confidence of their own communication skills and leadership resulting from their orientation leader experiences.

### **Theme One: Significance of Relationships**

One of the most common themes among participants was the significance they found in relationships formed and maintained throughout their orientation leader experiences. In their roles, they worked based on relationships with other teammates, supervisors, campus partners, new students, and parents & family members. Almost all participants expressed an experience of making meaningful relationships at multiple points of their orientation leader experience – before the summer while they were training, during the summer itself, and following the summer as their roles ended.

Participant 11 spoke to the necessity for close relationships between orientation leaders on his team:

I think our relationships with each other mattered because we were able to sort of use that in the orientation setting. One example is the way one supervisor would call on me to lead the morning cheers, or how we all knew we could look to this

one particular teammate to entertain guests between sessions. We were able to use each other's strengths to do our jobs better.

Participant 10 agreed that their bonds as teammates made them better able to carry out their roles:

It's helpful to be able to tell other people's stories. If I had a student express a concern about anxiety, for example, I might say I don't have as much experience with that personally but could point that student to my friend on the team who does. That comes from knowing each other well.

Participant 9 recounted the benefits he experienced because of the focus on relationship development within his orientation leader team:

A big part of the (orientation leader) experience is team development and we were really encouraged to be vulnerable and build relationships with one another. That was helpful because it made us better able to empathize with each other later and better able to empathize with the students in our groups. I think it was necessary to do that in the class and at our retreat and in those structured settings first because it set us up to do that naturally during the summer. The team didn't function if one of the 25 of us wasn't doing our job. Somewhere in the orientation schedule there was a gap when that happened. So, running things smoothly really depended on our ability to communicate with one another and hold each other accountable.

Of the 20 participants, seven made similar comments around the importance of relationships among their peers and the positive impacts of those relationships on their

team dynamic and overall experience. Participant 10 continued by speaking to the value of her relationship with university supervisors and its impact on her experience:

We had these awesome professionals who were interested in investing in us outside of the role, which was awesome. When they allowed us to see other sides of them too, that helped us feel more comfortable approaching them with issues or worries. I think it was important that we saw that.

Participant 7 echoed the way supervisors' communication and leadership affected the experience.

I think my experience was heightened when I could see them as a resource and as a friend. And work wasn't just a task. I enjoyed what I was doing and the way I was engaging and could tell my bosses did too. That made me more excited and more comfortable in my role. When I saw our bosses holding the doors at our main auditorium and greeting students and parents, I felt more comfortable doing the same thing. Their example made work feel a lot less like work.

Participant 4 mentioned the importance of maintaining positive relationships with campus partners, including those not directly involved with orientation sessions.

Everyone in the dining hall or at Starbucks is more likely to be kind or say good morning when I'm wearing my orientation uniform, partly because they recognize me as someone who has been polite or helpful in the past. Making those interactions positive helps me do my job better when I need their help.

Participant 7 told a story of an interaction with a campus partner that left a lasting impression and made her better able to communicate the work of that office to new students and families at orientation sessions.

I sat in her office for 15 minutes to interview her for a class presentation, but I now feel like I have a first-hand connection to her and her office, which makes me better at explaining that to new students. It keeps them engaged and it makes me appreciative for that relationship.

Beyond relationships with other team members or with university professionals, the orientation leader-participants spoke to the importance of maintaining relationships with the students they help orient to the university. Participant 1 referred to his orientation leader team as “the first people that [new students] trust - the first relationship they get to have” when they come to campus. Participant 3 explained that “At orientation, we are opening the opportunity for them to develop relationships in their peer groups and see us as older students who can serve as resources and as examples,” and commented on the importance of establishing connections with new students. Participant 4 agreed that those connections impact a student’s orientation experience.

Going to a financial aid talk isn’t going to affirm your college decision, but hearing someone else say they were also nervous or freaked out when they came to college is going to be a more calming and reassuring experience. That builds trust and helps them connect on a more personal level.

Participant 5 agreed, explaining that “with the students, you want them to feel like they can build a real relationship with you” because, as Participant 1 claims, ““You’re more likely to trust your peers, listen to them, have them rub off on you.” Whether with teammates, new students and their families, supervisors, or other campus professionals, all participants identified relationships as a significant part of their orientation leader experience.

## **Theme Two: Navigating Communicative Tensions**

While many participants identified relationships as one of the most positive parts of their experience, many of them also expressed some tension that came with navigating those interactions, particularly with professional staff members. Of the 20 participants, 10 of them spoke of experiences with role tension. Because of the social nature of this role, the student orientation leader experience is often characterized by mentoring relationships with staff members. While they serve as advisors who develop students as leaders and as people, they are also the employers and professional supervisors of student employees. Many participants articulated the ambiguity that sometimes came with navigating interactions with staff members caused by this duality. In discussing this perceived tension, Participant 4 claimed:

With our bosses, it wasn't always easy to understand the difference in when they wanted to be 100% raw us or 50% what they hired us to be, or somewhere in the middle. We had these relationships where we could hang out at their house or go to lunch and all be friends but knew we were coming to work to do a job the next day. I think expectations of the role were communicated as well as they could have been, but there are some things only learned through experience, and we got better at that part of the role with experience.

Five of the participants reported that part of the demand of the job is to fill in gaps that some campus professionals need filled. Participant 15 explained that one of her regular assignments was to assist on a campus tour for parents and family members hosted by a couple of campus partners. These campus tours are intended to provide information about university traditions and history. In one story, she recounted a time in

which a professional staff member, who did not seem capable of fulfilling her own responsibilities, looked to her (Participant 15) as more of a “personal assistant than anything else.” Rather than being viewed as a potential peer, she felt she was viewed as “lesser than.” She gave the following example:

There were multiple times we would go on the tour and she wouldn’t speak loud enough for all the guests to hear what she was saying, so I would stand in the back and repeat what she said to the attendees toward the back of the group so they knew what was going on. Occasionally, she [the professional staff member] would ask me to go get her water or run other errands during the tours, too. I was happy to assist in whatever way needed, but I wish that she would have seen me as a staff member as well.

Participant 1 drew the parallel between his interaction with supervisors to that with students: “I think that dynamic [with supervisors] often mirrored the way we had to sort of switch between roles with students in our groups” as orientation leaders have a similar task relating to new students while also exercising some authority over them. Many participants referred to this idea of “code-switching” in the ways they had to alternate between ways of interaction, depending on their given setting. While this seemed to apply to orientation leaders’ communication with supervisors, participants also expressed the need to “switch” their roles with other teammates, different groups of new students, and guests, and expressed the conflict which accompanied that.

**Communicative accommodation within role tensions.** One common example was the difference in interaction with parents as compared to their students. Sixteen of the twenty participants reported a marked difference in their own communication with



parents at orientation sessions because, as participant 15 explained, “they have different needs.” Participant 4 expressed a similar sentiment, claiming:

Parents want to know you are knowledgeable and respectable. But sometimes with students, acting professional can come off as pompous and not genuine, which defeats the whole message we’re sending. I make a point to be as silly as I can with students while also still getting the point across. Anyone can be a leader and be involved at our university, and sometimes communicating that is easier when we show how different we are.

Participant 5 further expanded on the differences in parent interactions and student interactions: “You want parents to feel that their students are safe, so that rapport is important. But with the students you want them to feel like they can build a real relationship with you in that two days.” Several other participants spoke to their need to ensure parents could trust them, while also ensuring that new students could both trust them *and* feel they could relate as peers.

As orientation sessions welcome many different types of new students, orientation leaders also had to modify their roles to best meet the needs of those different groups and expressed the ways those needs differ among freshmen students, transfer students and nontraditional students. Participant 1 recounted his experience:

“I kind of struggled with the role in regard to freshman students compared to transfer students. I think it can be easier with new students because they have more of a professional expectation of you and aren’t quite on the peer level that transfer students are. They [transfer students] can look at the whole big monster of

orientation and identify the few things they need from it, whereas freshman students think they need every detail, so that changes our role a little bit.”

In discussing the perceived differences in first-year and transfer students, Participant 16 said he would “try not to over-explain things to transfer students and let them ask questions more; whereas with freshman I tended to assume they don’t know most things and need me to tell them everything.” Participant 17 echoed similar perceptions of transfer students:

Their questions are going to be more direct. They don’t need you to tell them what a meal plan and a transcript is; they need to know where to pay their tuition and where their classes are. They don’t need all the steps broken down the way that freshman do. Even some freshmen students whose siblings or parents had attended the university had fewer questions and didn’t need as much attention. So, I just had to be flexible with each group.

While most participants indicated a tendency to change or modify their communication, a couple of them recalled strategic choices in their vocabulary and mannerisms. When asked about the ways she speaks to parents and professionals as compared to students, Participant 18 recounted, “I tried to maintain my posture, tone of voice, and correct usage of pronouns.” Participant 17 provided a few similar examples:

I would take a group of students on a tour and talk about the area of campus where most people tailgate and try to explain what that experience is like for students, in an appropriate and realistic way. I might tell them which groups tailgate and the opportunities that exist for my students to be a part of those activities and traditions. But in that conversation with families, I wouldn’t

necessarily go into that party of the football experience but would focus on how affordable season tickets are and encourage them to attend the parent & family football event in the fall.

Participant 17 went on to say that while she is sure to use the correct terminology for campus resources and landmarks, she is also aware of a vernacular perhaps better understood by incoming students. “I might say, ‘This is the Fresh Food Company, but we call it ‘The Fresh.’” Participant 18 echoed this experience with his own small group of students. “It’s called a ‘residence hall,’ and I’ll say that, but if they [new students] know it as a dorm, I am probably going to call it that first, so they connect with what I’m saying. Being the utmost professional isn’t necessarily the biggest priority in that setting.”

It should be noted that some individuals did not report any change in their communication or enactment of their role, regardless of setting or interaction. Participant 6 explained that she did not experience this sort of ‘multiple selves,’ as some of her peers did. “For me, being a student is more professional than not so my ‘normal student self’ didn’t have to be very different from my paraprofessional self. Because of my previous leadership experience, I was used to that sort of engagement with parents and other professionals,” she explained. Similarly, Participant 12 claimed she felt she needed “to consistently be the professional and only that,” and as a result, experienced less of the conflict that came with so many types of interactions with varying dynamics and levels of relationships that accompanied some other participants’ experiences.

However, most of the participants expressed some modification of their roles depending on the setting in which they found themselves. While three participants

insisted they employed the same communicative presence and approach with all interactants, 17 of the 20 indicated some experience of role tension and the need to adapt to expectations of interaction.

### **Theme Three: Confidence in Communicative Abilities**

A final major theme was student orientation leaders' confidence in their own communication, during and especially after their orientation leader experiences. Many participants recounted examples of interactions with upper-level university administrators in which they [the students] interacted with professionals in a manner they would not have prior to their orientation leader experiences. Participant 1 told this story: "The other day, we had some missorted mail in the office I work in, and one piece was addressed to the Associate Provost. I just walked over to her office and had a conversation with her, which is something I would not have done before my orientation leader experience. Because I've learned to communicate in that way [with university administrators], I feel comfortable doing it now."

In addition to interactions with university professionals, several orientation leaders talked about the way the communication skills gained in their orientation leader experiences have transferred to their other leadership roles on campus:

I think the skills serving in this role gave me have transferred to my other roles. I am a sorority chapter president and my confidence in spaces like recruitment roundtables and parent preview events is totally different than I think it would have been before this summer. I'm not fearful of being able to say the right things and communicate effectively with those groups of people. (Participant 10)

The same participant claimed a sense of responsibility for the knowledge and experience she gained and her obligation to share that in other spaces of her life:

It's my job to keep serving as advocate for the university and its resources. It's my job to go back to my sorority and to other groups and use my knowledge about Career Services and Financial Aid to encourage my friends to actually utilize those places and people. Not only do I know more about offices, but I've spent a summer seeing how hard those professionals work and that makes me more inclined to promote them.

Participant 6 explained that she felt a similar need to maintain the skills and reputation she had developed through the role within the other organizations she is a part of: "Even after the role ends, people look to you to reflect the values of the university. When people see you not doing that, they start to question that ambassador role."

Participant 5 recounted the ways she sees other students as a result of her time serving as an orientation leader.

I tend to approach other students on campus the way I'm used to in the Southern Style role. When I'm in some of my larger classes, or at student government meetings, I ask about their major, about their campus experience, how they're enjoying Southern Miss. I think sometimes that ambassador identity still comes out.

Their teammate, Participant 2, expressed a similar boldness as a byproduct of her experience:

One of my strengths is the ability to challenge, and my orientation leader experience made me more willing to do that. If I have a concern, I am very much

not afraid to address that with university professionals in a way that is respectful but confident in my opinion.

Beyond specific roles or relationships, many participants expressed a generally heightened awareness of communication, interpersonal relationships, and the importance of words. Participant 11 claimed:

If I had not been on this team, I don't think I would have learned the importance of effective communication. I think I'm very sure to explain things more thoroughly now. I spent all this time with people who are very different from each other and learned that some things offend people that don't others. We just all hear words differently. So, I think now I even get on people's nerves with the way I try to over clarify my intention. But I think it's worth it.

Participant eight claimed her experience changed the way she communicates about the university. She stated, "I am more conscious of the image I'm trying to reflect. For example, when a new student makes a negative comment about our on-campus dining facility, I'll point out the way they accommodate the Catholic community by providing fish on Fridays." She added, later, that she has since clung to the importance of recognizing others individually.

I call people by name. I've learned how much that matters and how much that's impacted my own experience so in my transition from being a mentee to a mentor have tried to do that as much as possible. (Participant 8)

Participant 19 testified to the personal growth she experienced as a result of her serving in the role:

I didn't much any self-confidence prior to southern style. I thought I was too bold,

too loud, and didn't know what strengths I had or how to use them. southern style taught me to be confident in who I am but also be continuously open to growth and trying not to be stagnant. I feel better in my skin and overall realized I am a competent person with skills that I discovered on southern style that I've been able to apply in class, work, and relationships.

All twenty participants expressed some improvement in their confidence as communicators, as leaders, and as students because of roles and the way they learned to manage consequential challenges.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The first year of college has been widely considered the most difficult period of adjustment faced by students (Giddan, 1998) as it follows what is often the first major life transition among collegians. In her work on mattering and marginality, Schlossberg (1989) contributes to the understanding of what happens during those adjustments. She states:

Every time an individual changes roles or experiences a transition, the potential for feeling marginal arises. The larger the difference between the former role and the new role the more marginal the person may feel, especially if there are no norms for the new roles. (p. 7)

Thus, it is difficult for students to adjust to their new role as collegians, particularly because they have no prior experience and don't understand their new role. Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, and Oseguera (2008) argue that an important factor in the orientation, transition, and retention of a college student is the degree to which they feel they belong on a college campus based on social and academic interactions. Similarly, Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, and Salomone (2002) claim that “‘perceived peer support’ is one of five factors that can adequately measure college students' sense of belonging” (2002, p. 206). These feelings of mattering, connectedness, and belonging all begin at new student orientation, making these one to two-day events significant for all who participate. Because this is such a pivotal time for so many involved, it is imperative that those responsible for facilitating such a transition can do so to the very best of their abilities.



While the successful execution of orientation events certainly relies on orientation professionals and other campus partners, much of the work concerning interpersonal interactions with students and family members rests on student orientation leaders. This study aimed to evaluate the experiences of student orientation leaders as they navigated a summer full of interactions with incoming students, families, university professionals, and other student orientation leaders. In some form or fashion, each orientation leader discussed the role of relationships in their experiences, and whether those communicative experiences were positive or negative. As many of them mentioned, the orientation leader's role is one of a social nature. This people-oriented aspect of the role makes the job very situational and very dependent on the "environmental script" (Ledford et. al., 2015, p. 31). As a result, students orientation leaders are routinely placed in situations that will bolster their self-efficacy in their interpersonal communication skills (Shook & Keup, 2002). At a basic level, communication serves "to exchange information; create, develop and maintain interpersonal relationships; influence others; define and give meaning to persons' experiences; [and] create a shared social reality for self and others" (Jensen, 2018, p. 26). The results of the current study suggest that the student orientation leaders are responsible for ensuring these communicative goals are met between themselves and new students, families, and university professionals.

Perhaps the most meaningful findings of the current study were those relating to the complexity of the multi-layered roles of student orientation leaders. The need for participants to speak, think, and behave differently depending on where they are, what they are doing, and with whom they are interacting creates a potentially challenging experience. While all the participants expressed a perceived growth in confidence,

increased awareness of communication skills, and a learned ability to lead others, few of the participants seemed to gain these abilities without the trial and error of testing their limits. As student leaders, they negotiated their identities as para-professionals carefully, determining the communicative decisions that best fit their interactions with others.

The student leaders aimed to meet communicative expectations of their supervisors, campus partners, and of other team members; sometimes, the student orientation leaders became frustrated when those expectations were unclear or were not communicated. The student leaders strived to fit the mold of professionalism demanded by their role as a para-professional while also maintaining the ability to relate to new students. Again, as noted by Participant 2, “Professional doesn’t always align with vulnerable, unfortunately or fortunately.” As the orientation leaders spend a summer working “to exchange information; create, develop and maintain interpersonal relationships, influence others; define and give meaning to persons’ experiences; and create a shared social reality for self and others” (Jensen, 2018, p. 26), they weather a range of professional and personal stressors to meet the communicative needs of many.

Finally, the results surrounding participants’ increased confidence and leadership abilities contribute to the widely-held belief that peer-leadership roles and programs are good and positive things. The participants of the current study discussed that the skills they learned as orientation leaders transferred to their roles in fraternities and sororities, job interviews, and their leadership roles in other organizational settings. They spoke of more successful interactions in the classroom, while at work, and within their social networks through serving as an orientation leader. Participants mentioned a heightened

awareness of “what they say and do in and out of the role” (Participant 6). All of them expressed a generally positive impression of themselves and their personal growth during reflecting on their student orientation leader experiences. One might argue that, not just despite, but perhaps, because of the unique challenges involved in their student orientation leader experiences, they could rise to the occasion and develop their communicative and leadership skills.

The question left to consider then is how well student orientation leaders could have fulfilled their duties and could have grown as students, leaders, and professionals, if they *had* been adequately prepared to manage the complex roles of the peer-leader and student paraprofessional. The results of the current study indicate that the experience of the student orientation leader is undoubtedly impactful for participants; however, there is much that university supervisors could improve on in facilitating the experience for students.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study lends significant implications for the field of higher education and student affairs practitioners. While many institutions have thorough, well-developed classes and programs designed for student orientation leader training, this study and its findings suggest a potential gap in the curriculum used for that training that communication theory could fill. In her work on successful orientation programming, Masterson speaks to the importance of training orientation leaders. She claims, “Knowing the best ways to employ students in peer learning is key” (Masterson, 2017, para 3). If student leaders were equipped with a better theoretical understanding of their roles and

the potential interactions they may face, they might enter their roles better prepared to anticipate and manage the communicative challenges they face.

Similarly, communication theory could inform the way student affairs professionals conceptualize their positions as supervisors to student orientation leaders. If they understand the way role theory, communication accommodation theory, social penetration theory, and uncertainty management theory all contribute to the unique experience of a student orientation leader, professionals can better understand the challenges the student leaders may likely face. If they understand students' apprehension around managing interactions with supervisors and other campus professionals, supervisors can modify their own behavior to assist students in managing the uncertainty in those relationships (Brashers, 2007; Brashers, 2001). By understanding the way student leaders' roles can be complicated by unclear expectations, supervisors can clarify lines of communication and offer support in managing that ambiguity. When all parties are aware of the emotions and judgements caused by uncertainty which fuel their communication (Miller, 2007), they can more carefully interpret and construct messages that help maintain relationships (Miller, 2007).

Fortunately for institutions of higher education, professional organizations help in the training and development of higher education and student affairs professionals. For instance, National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) provides "education, leadership and professional development" and "to create a community of practice that defines and enriches the fields of orientation, transition, and retention." (NODA, 2019, para 2). NODA conducts regional annual conferences for training and enrichment purposes. As the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Professionals

reports, professionals exposed to educational sessions focused on communication theory are likely to become better supervisors and better practitioners, ultimately developing better student leaders and a better orientation experience for students, professionals, and guests alike, (Carpenter & Simpson, 2007).

### **Limitations & Future Research**

The current study serves as a case study of one student orientation leader group at one university in the Southeast whose participants shared similar experiences, and all worked under the same administration. While data collection yielded some rich data concerning their experiences, it was limited in that it only covered those experiences. This institution's team of orientation leaders only selects between 20 and 25 students each year, whereas other institutions recruit larger groups of students who likely have differing experiences. A more robust study might look at the experiences of orientation leaders at other institutions around the country, and specifically different types of institutions.

Additionally, the researcher's affiliation with the participant group in the study could have potentially been a limitation. As a former member of the student orientation group studied, her experience fueled the initial interest in the potential challenges faced by others in this role and gave her direct access to the individuals interviewed. Although the researcher's connection helped to ensure trust between participants and the researcher, it also influenced the questions asked in the interviews. A future iteration of this study might yield valuable data if conducted by a different researcher with a totally different perspective of the student orientation leader experience.

Finally, while there is certainly room for more research around the experience of student orientation leaders as paraprofessionals, another helpful perspective comes from students, parents, family members, and other guests who attend orientation sessions and interact with student orientation leaders. New students' accounts of their interactions with student orientation leaders can help shed light on the successes and shortcomings of those student leaders and of overall orientation programs. And while parents and family members are also 'consumers' of the orientation experience, their interaction with and perception of student orientation leaders as paraprofessionals likely differs from that of new students, as they are not peers to the students in these roles. A study centered around the parent and family member experience of interacting with student orientation leaders is worth consideration as it could contribute to the body of knowledge influencing best practices in the fields of new student orientation and student leader training.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The results of the current study shed light on the specific complexities impacting the communicative roles of student orientation leaders on college campuses. It is worth noting that the findings of the current study do not suggest that the concerns and challenges highlighted stem solely from the actions of orientation professionals or that university professionals are not actively working to foster successful experiences for student leaders. Rather, this study aims to aid university professionals in their understanding of how 1.) their communication is perceived by student leaders and 2.) how they might modify their communication and approaches to increase the effectiveness of the orientation leader experience.

Although supervisors, campus partners, and orientation leaders themselves may assume an adequate understanding of their roles, a firmer grasp of communication theory through communication training can help better inform each individual and give them a better understanding of the expectations and perceptions of others with whom they work. Ultimately, constructive and open dialogue between university professionals and student peer leaders concerning roles and perceived norms among all members will help foster a more meaningful orientation experience for new students, guests, student leaders and professionals alike (Cuseo, 2015).

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## Appendix A: Research Instrument

### Research Instrument

1. Why did you decide to serve on Southern Style?
2. With whom do you communicate on a typical day of orientation?
3. How is your interaction with new students different from your interaction with parents and families?
4. Are there difficulties associated with managing your identity as a student and as a staff member?
5. Does your role as a University ambassador affect the way you communicate in general? How so?
6. Can you describe your orientation leader team dynamic?
7. How important would you say that dynamic - the way you communicate and are in relationship with team members - is to your success as a team?
8. Do you find that communication with fellow orientation leaders impacts your overall experience as an individual? How so?
9. How does your communication with supervisors affect your experience as an orientation leader?
10. How were expectations of you/your role communicated?
11. How does your communication with other university professionals affect your experience as an orientation leader?
12. Do you perceive your communication with new students to affect their experience? How so?
13. How does your communication with true freshman students compare to your communication with transfer students and with nontraditional students?
14. Do you find it important in your role to be perceived as professional? Why?
15. If so, do you find that you modify your communication in order to achieve that perception?
16. Are there any times you can think of where you experienced any kind of role conflict?

- a. In the way you interacted with those who were your supervisors but also your friends?
  - b. In having to appear or be more “student” than “staff member” or vice versa in certain spaces?
17. Tell me about your experience of re-assimilation into “normal student life.”
- a. Was that transition challenging or significant in any way?
  - b. Do you find that some of the ways you communicate and interact are different now from what they were, pre-SS?
  - c. How does it feel to not be in that official role but still in relationship with many of those people?

## Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001

Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | [www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board](http://www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board)

### NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.  
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 18091112

PROJECT TITLE: Peer vs. Para-Professional: Assessing the Communicative Challenges Faced by Student Orientation Leaders

PROJECT TYPE: Honor's Thesis Project

RESEARCHER(S): Casey Ford

COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Arts and Sciences

SCHOOL: Communication Studies

FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 10/15/2018 to 10/15/2019

**Edward L. Goshorn, Ph.D.**  
**Institutional Review Board**

## Appendix C: Standard Informed Consent Form



### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STANDARD (SIGNED) INFORMED CONSENT

<b>STANDARD (SIGNED) INFORMED CONSENT PROCEDURES</b>
<p>This completed document must be signed by each consenting research participant.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The Project Information and Research Description sections of this form should be completed by the Principal Investigator before submitting this form for IRB approval.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Signed copies of the consent form should be provided to all participants.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Last Edited February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018</p>

Today's date: August 29, 2018		
<b>PROJECT INFORMATION</b>		
Project Title: Peer vs. Para-professional: Assessing the Communicative Challenges Faced by Student Orientation Leaders		
Principal Investigator: Casey Ford	Phone:	Email: 601.329.6063
College: Arts & Sciences	Department: Communication Studies	
<b>RESEARCH DESCRIPTION</b>		
<p><b>1. Purpose:</b></p> <p>The goal of the study is to analyze the communicative experience of student orientation leaders who serve as para-professionals and are also students themselves. We hope to discover the communicative challenges associated with their position as orientation leaders, the potential conflicts these individuals experience, and the ways in which they use communication to reconcile these conflicts.</p> <p><b>2. Description of Study:</b></p> <p>Individuals will be asked to participate in a 30-45 minute interview concerning your experiences as a student orientation leader at Southern Miss. We are interested in understanding the potential communicative challenges you face as being both a student and para-professional.</p> <p><b>3. Benefits:</b></p> <p>Beyond assisting in a research project and furthering knowledge, participants will not receive any benefits.</p> <p><b>4. Risks:</b></p> <p>There are very low to no risks associated with this project. However, if you feel you need to speak with someone after participating, in the interview, you can contact USM Counseling Services at 601-266-4829.</p> <p><b>5. Confidentiality:</b></p> <p>Once the study has been completed, the data will be stored under lock and key in a faculty member's office on campus. The identity of participants will remain confidential, and their identities will never be linked with the data.</p> <p><b>6. Alternative Procedures:</b></p>		

## **Appendix D: Recruitment Email**

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Casey Ford, and I am an Honors College senior at the University of Southern Mississippi. Along with my advisor, Dr. Katie Anthony, I am currently working on my undergraduate thesis, and I am studying the communicative experiences of student orientation leaders in higher education. I am particularly interested in the ways in which student orientation leaders navigate being both a student and a para-professional.

Because of your experiences as a student orientation leader, I am contacting you to ask you to participate in a 30-45-minute interview. If you are willing to participate, please feel free to contact me at [casey.ford@usm.edu](mailto:casey.ford@usm.edu) or 601-329-6063.

I thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Casey Ford