

**Supporting Students Successful Academic and Co-curricular Transition through
an Experiential and Learning-based Orientation Program**

presented by

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Through Launch into Loras, an intensive first-year orientation taking place the four days prior to the start of the fall semester, a teaching team consisting of a faculty member, student development professional, and peer assistant work collaboratively to launch and support new students' academic and social transition from high school to college. The program provides a common curriculum based upon Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy and sets the stage for the first year experience course, Modes of Inquiry, and the college's expectations of its students. The four-day program begins with concrete, hands-on activities and ends with more abstract reflection and discussion.

On the first evening of Launch, participants attend a convocation ceremony and then break into their small groups for an evening of concrete activities. Both the ceremony and the small-group meetings, which include get-to-know you activities, an overview of expectations during the program, and a diversity activity (Wall of Opportunity), provide participants with a concrete knowledge base of the college-level academic and social expectations.

Day 2 brings two concrete experiences, a low-ropes course and a service project, both of which require participants to engage in observation, reflection, and application of knowledge. Students form closer relationships with their peers, engage in reflective dialogue regarding group processes, and make initial connections to service learning.

The third and fourth day build off of day two to continue more abstract analysis of the college's mission and expectations and the Launch theme. Each Launch orientation has a representative quotation and theme related to the common reading. This theme is pervasive throughout the materials the students receive and is tied in across all four days of Launch activities.

The third day actually begins with analysis of the theme through another active learning activity. For example, one year the theme related to disparity in socioeconomic status and students participated in a Poverty Simulation. Another year the main focus was on diversity and the students played Barnaga. Prior to Launch all participants are required to complete a common reading and a short paper related to that common reading. Through reflective discussion Day 3 also introduces students to the college's mission, values and life-long learning skills; our Catholic identity statement; the expectations of a college-student at both the curricular and co-curricular level; and our academic honesty policies. Day 4 is focused on discussions of the common reading and application of the themes throughout the common reading to the activities of the past three days and of how they may relate to the upcoming semester.

Participant evaluations confirm that the program conveyed expectations of the college community, created a climate of openness and trust, and introduced students to important campus initiatives, such as service learning and respecting diversity. Faculty, staff and upper-level student facilitators have reported a number of benefits, including a more active learning environment, reduction in social violations, and general preparedness of the students once classes begin. Each year we have also improved the program to create a more open and seamless collaboration between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. Because students are organized by their first year experience course, the teaching teams can seamlessly continue building upon the knowledge gained and analysis experienced in Launch throughout the fall semester. As described in Kolb's theory of experiential learning, they are able to now test out their new knowledge, skills and abilities in new situations.

While there have been many successes with the program, some challenges remain. These include clearly linking assessment to outcomes, the time and energy required of faculty, staff, and student facilitators, student preparation in regards to the common reading, the program is seen as dumping ground for campus departments, logistics of organizing off-campus experiences for ~400 students, and conflict with athletic programs.

As we have mentioned our common first year experience course, Modes of Inquiry is closely tied into Launch and thus we include EBI data from 2008 which shows that students believed that the course improved their connections with peers and faculty, contributed to their sense of belonging and their overall satisfaction with the college. These results are statistically significantly higher than the EBI data from 2005 (the first year of Launch), which may suggest that Launch being tied into MOI is responsible for the increase in these perceptions among students.