

The Orientation Express

A first-hand commentary by a fifth-year student



Arriving on campus Monday morning, I was stunned at how things had changed since the previous April. Students had abandoned sweatpants and t-shirts for designer jeans and complicated shoes. Kids wandered aimlessly, but were *smiling*, a far cry from the stressed-out rushing that filled the walkways the previous spring. And people were carrying books, even though class didn't start for three days! It could only mean one thing: Orientation. My goal: stow away any fifth-year cynicism and tag along for a tour of campus, a few peppy speeches, and hopefully some insight into the first-year experience.

Several minutes later, I was standing in the middle of Tory Atrium, clutching my book bag and looking as legitimately confused as the swarm of freshmen passing by me.

Our group wandered in silence for several minutes. Our Orientation Leader was surprisingly calm and yet impressively resilient at withstanding the awkward quiet emanating from our group. It was a far cry from the boisterous Orientation Leader who guided me around campus four years ago, and even the other leaders captaining the group surrounding us. The real observations, however, were being made elsewhere.

"I haven't seen anyone who fits the typical 'nerd' profile yet," announced a blond, sunglassesed first-year walking next to me.

"Yeah, me neither," I assured him, glancing around to be sure.

It was the first of admittedly few "high school" comments I heard during orientation, but hilarious nonetheless. Being as you all made it to University, you've just become a member of the most concentrated "nerd" population in Edmonton. And the longer you stay here, I think you'll find the typical "nerds" are the ones who are "graduating."

Coming into Quad, Orientation's most notable feature gradually began to dawn on the Beck playing through loud speakers: faculty-themed chants. Stuck between arts students with spirit and engineers proclaiming superiority, memories of my own cheer-chanting days came flooding back.

"Student's will start this cheer in the middle of class, and the profs will just stop teaching and wait because they know it's tradition," one eager Orientation Leader told me years ago.

Well, naïve first-years, here's another lesson in the ways of our fair campus: nobody ever, ever uses these chants outside of Orientation.

University, while full of books and studying, is still several degrees cooler than having students randomly break into clapping verse during the middle of a lecture—or anywhere, for that matter. I have a required first-year course this term, and so help me if I hear a single round of "I've got spirit, yes I do!"

Passing through Quad, our still silent Orientation Leader dutifully lead us to ETLC, where we sat for a presentation on student life. Glancing around, the hall seemed typical of first-year arrivals. A Burberry spotted sea of hot pants and popped collars, it seemed to be a group eagerly waiting to hear where the nearest kegger is being held rather than about wholesome student activities. To the contrary, however, an inspired, *Lost*-themed presentation on campus life was well-received by attentive freshmen, and, if necessarily over the top, the SU did manage to put on a mostly accurate information session on how to conduct oneself at the U of A.

What may have come off as the lamest bits of advice to the students looking for a Hollywood university experience were also the most sound. Volunteering or joining a student group—as uncool as it may sound—will undoubtedly change your university experience. Aside from meeting new people and padding your resumé, trying your hand at campus activities could very well help you discover a future career, something your undergraduate degree in History doesn't necessarily prepare you for.

More importantly, however, is to heed the advice to buckle down and study during your first months at the U of A. If I can pass on one piece of wisdom I've gained during my stay at the U, it's to leave slacking off

the veterans. You're going to be tested differently than you were in high school; not only do you need to know the material, but you have to show you understand it. That means reading on your own and no more last-minute cram sessions in attempt to wing your way through a major exam—at least until you learn how to slack off appropriately. Nothing will ruin your first term at university like getting slapped across the face by a couple of Fs on your first batch of midterms.

But one glaring falsehood seemed to have snuck its way into the presentation. The Powerplant as a great date location? An awesome place for campus socializing? Listen here, newbies, as I can tell you that for quite a while—the whole time I've been at the U of A, in fact—the 'Plant has not been a happenin' place to be seen. Cold food and incredibly slow service made the best alternatives RATT or a trip to Whyte Ave. To be fair, however, the SU has planned to revitalize the 'Plant this year with a buffet and coffee shop, so take charge and help make it the swinging place it once was—just don't be surprised if your first visit is a little underwhelming.

Moving on, the rest of the morning consisted of a casual tour and getting ONEcards in the pavilion—pretty tame stuff. It wasn't until that afternoon's safe sex seminar that my interest as a faux first-year was once again peaked.

"Cock! Balls!" I blurted as the presenters asked us for some slang terms for our genitals. What I had initially planned to claim was a condescending method to engage students was, as it turned out, pretty fun.

While perhaps necessary to still go over the basics such as unrolling a condom and using proper lubrication, some parts of the presentation were a little out there, nonetheless. Such tidbits as, "Intercourse is just one planet in a vast galaxy of sexual possibilities," and, "You want to make sure you hold onto the base of condom as you pull the penis out of the vagina or wherever it is," marked some of the presentations cheesier and awkward moments, but were still punctuated with good-natured laughter. And, after the initial talk, questions on the birth control shot, Depro provera, and HIV marked a slightly more mature round of information gathering.

Still, after listening to guest speaker Captain Condom of Safesex Airlines and being peppered with numerous stats on pregnancy and STIs, I couldn't help but notice the growing snickers and laughter that was coming from behind me. It wasn't until I noticed the sideways glances when I got up to leave that my constant note-taking throughout the sex-ed presentation—yes, I was even writing during the masturbation and analingus portions—were causing the giggles from behind me.

The rest of Orientation went off without much of note. Bear bells and lanyards adorned most of the eager new students, and, four years on, I still can't name the chancellor of the U of A. Student groups filled the pavilion with enticing offers to learn how to bartend just like Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*, rush for a fraternity, or become a two-bit writer for the campus rag. Four solid years since my Orientation, and it's still pretty much the same.

In the end, having made my way through orientation twice during the course of acquiring one degree was, surprisingly, not that bad. The picture they paint is, perhaps, all roses, and their methods sometimes come off a little too goofy, but for those arriving on campus for the first time, an exciting and even silly greeting might be just what is needed before the actual work of university starts to impress itself on new and old students alike.



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