

# Students' Adjustment to College: A Comparison of Orientation Program Attendees and Non-Attendees

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*Summer orientation programs are one of the most common methods utilized by colleges and universities to promote adjustment to college and retention of first-time freshmen. Not all students take advantage of orientation programs, although the programs are often applauded for their essential role in easing students' adjustment to college. This study sought to compare first-time freshmen who attended an orientation program with first-time freshmen who did not attend the orientation program in regards to their campus knowledge and experience. The first-time freshman class at an exclusively undergraduate four-year university was surveyed. The results of the data analysis indicated that there was not a statistically significant difference between first-time freshmen who attended the orientation program and those who did not, except in regards to their participation in and attendance at campus activities. This result underscores the value that students place on the social components of college as it relates to student transition and retention.*

Summer orientation programs are among the most popular of transition programs and often include both academic and social components (Tinto, 1993). Yet, despite their wide use among colleges and universities, it has been stated that orientation programs often “fail to provide the long-term academic and social assistance new students require during the first months of their college career” (Tinto, 1988, p. 451). Research has indicated that successful orientation programs promote contact with faculty and staff along with mentorship in order to aid students' adjustment to college. However, orientation programs have been found to have a “substantial total effect” on adjustment to college, although that total effect is not always direct in nature (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986, p. 171).

The transition to college can be difficult for first-time freshmen. Difficulty often arises when confronting the challenges associated with transitioning from high school into a college educational environment. The majority of freshmen students enter college during the fall semester after having graduated from high school in the preceding spring. These students are often perplexed by the process of

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transitioning to college because “there are many different paths into the collegiate system” (Tinto, 1993, p. 8). Enrollment in college is a challenge in and of itself because college enrollment requires students to strategize through obstacles, opportunities, and changes (Clark, 2005).

Orientation programs remain integral strategies for colleges and universities in their effort to promote persistence and retention among students. For example, research by Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) concluded that two variables predict students’ intentions to persist: a sense of belonging and institutional commitment. Herzog (2005) indicated that “the departure risk of students is typically the highest in the first year, which requires a solid understanding of which factors are likely to elevate that risk and at what point during the freshmen year” (p. 923). Colleges and universities have an obligation to construct conditions that promote student success (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

## **Purpose and Scope**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a campus summer orientation program on students’ adjustment to college at an exclusively undergraduate, four-year university in a mid-southern state. The campus summer orientation program at the university is offered throughout the summer for first-time freshmen with less than 12 credit hours. Thirteen different orientation sessions are offered, and each session is one day in length. The objective of this study was to compare first-time freshmen who attended the campus summer orientation program with first-time freshmen who did not attend the program in regards to their campus knowledge and experience.

## **Methodology**

The researchers developed an instrument specific to the institution where this study was conducted. The instrument included demographic questions as well as seven scale items pertaining to knowledge about campus policies and experiences to date as a student. There were additional questions for students who indicated that they attended the campus summer orientation program. The instrument was piloted by administering it to 11 first-time freshmen who had attended the campus summer orientation program. Piloting of this instrument yielded a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  (alpha) value of .66 for the items related to student knowledge of campus policies and experiences to date.

All first-time freshmen at the exclusively undergraduate four-year university ( $N = 1,304$ ) were invited to participate in the study during the spring semester of their freshman year. The decision was made to collect data at this point in time in order to determine the long-term effect of the summer orientation program throughout the freshman year. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the study was granted an exemption from institutional review board (IRB) oversight because no subjects who are members of vulnerable populations were targeted,

the research involved no more than minimal risk and was clearly outweighed by the benefits. The instrument was administered via an online survey system, and invitations to participate in the study were sent to students' e-mail addresses. The link to the instrument was accessible for four weeks, and two e-mail reminders were sent to students during that time period. The raw data file was downloaded following the data collection period. The delivered sample for this study was  $n = 118$  (9%), and results were generalizable to the respondents due, in part, to the use of electronic data collection methods and the decision to survey the population. Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences was utilized to analyze quantitative data. Responses to open-ended questions were sorted by themes utilizing the categorizing strategies approach for qualitative data analysis as described by Rossman and Rallis (2003).

## **Results**

### ***Characteristics of Respondents***

A majority of the respondents were female ( $n = 77$ , 68.1%), Caucasian ( $n = 93$ , 84.5%), and single ( $n = 90$ , 79.6%). Some demographic characteristics of the respondents were indicative of a group of "traditional" college students in this study. For example, a majority of the respondents were under 25 years of age ( $n = 68$ , 59.6%) and had graduated from high school during the previous year ( $n = 85$ , 73.3%). A majority of the respondents indicated that they had earned a standard high school diploma ( $n = 99$ , 87.6%). Finally,  $n = 59$  (50%) indicated that they had attended the campus summer orientation program.

A considerable number of the respondents were full-time students (enrolled for 12 or more hours) for the previous fall semester ( $n = 46$ , 40.4%), and a considerable number ( $n = 48$ , 42.1%) were full-time students at the time when data were collected for this study. Some respondents had also earned college credit prior to matriculating at the university ( $n = 45$ , 38.8%), with concurrent coursework in high school being the most frequently cited method for doing so.

An open-ended question asked the participants to describe their reasons for attending the four-year university. Responses from students were sorted by themes utilizing the categorizing strategies approach for qualitative data analysis as described by Rossman and Rallis (2003). The major categories which emerged from that analysis included: close to home location ( $n = 75$ ), reasonable cost ( $n = 25$ ), suited needs/personality ( $n = 15$ ), and receipt of scholarship or financial aid ( $n = 13$ ).

### ***Campus Knowledge and Experiences***

There were a total of seven scale items pertaining to students' knowledge about campus policies and experiences to date. The responses to these scale items indicated that a majority of the first-time freshmen understood campus academic

policies and procedures as 95.6% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. A total of 82.2% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they understood the requirements for their degrees. A total of 77.7% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they were satisfied with the decision to attend the university. Finally, 79.4% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they planned to continue as a student at the university.

Independent samples t-test was used to compare the means of the seven items between those who attended the campus summer orientation program and those who did not. A separate t-test was calculated for each of the seven items on the scale which measured students' knowledge about campus policies and experiences to date. There was a statistically significant difference for one item, "I participate in or attend campus activities,"  $t(116) = -2.166, p = .032$ . (see Table 1), between those who attended and those who did not attend the campus summer orientation program. This difference indicated that students who did not attend the campus summer orientation program were not participating in or attending campus activities.

TABLE 1

**Independent Sample t-Test Comparing Orientation Program Attendees to Non-Attendees regarding Knowledge of Campus Policies and Experiences**

Item	t	p
I understand general campus academic policies and procedures.	-2.67	.790
I understand the requirements for my degree.	-.550	.583
I have developed a relationship with my advisor or a faculty member.	1.885	.062
I participate in campus organizations and clubs.	-1.490	.139
I participate in or attend campus activities.	-2.166	.032
I am satisfied with my decision to attend the university.	-.284	.777
I will likely continue as a student at the university.	-.354	.724

*t= Independent Samples t-Test*

*p= Alpha Level*

**Discussion**

Data collected through the study indicated that respondents were generally traditional college students who entered the university during the fall after graduating from high school during the preceding spring. Likewise, data indicated that opportunities to earn college credit were popular among respondents in the study. These results suggested that respondents of this study would not be considered "students in transition," a group of students who are often considered at risk of not persisting in college. Location and reasonable cost were the primary

reasons associated with attendance at the university, which suggested that issues of opportunity and access to higher education were key factors for first-time freshmen when selecting a college or university. However, these generalizations are only applicable to the respondents (delivered sample) as the study did not include any method to compare respondents to non-respondents due to the decisions to utilize electronic data collection methods and survey the entire population. Attempts to generalize these findings to other types of students or institutions should be made with caution.

Analysis of the study data indicated that students have become generally aware of campus policies and regulations through some method as those who attended the campus summer orientation program were not different than those who did not. The only difference between the group of attendees and non-attendees was the respondents' participation in or attendance at campus activities. Response data indicated that 31% ( $n = 33$ ) of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they had participated in or attended campus activities. This result indicates that respondents are not participating in social activities which some deem necessary to adjust to college life. Tinto (1993, 1998) as well as Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfle (1998) discussed the importance of social support systems developed through orientation programs. The fact that students who did not attend the campus summer orientation program were unlike their peers in regards to their participation in and attendance of campus activities indicates that they are missing opportunities for social interaction and support in college. This result begs the question about the long-term retention of these students who did not attend the orientation program and furthermore who have not attended or participated in campus activities.

## **Implications for Orientation Programming**

This study supported the statement from Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfle (1986) regarding the unknown total direct effect of orientation programs as the two groups were not statistically different on the majority of scale items. However, this result should in no way discredit the value and importance of summer orientation programs as students who opted to attend the program saw the value in doing so and felt that attendance at the program aided their adjustment to college. Specifically, additional data collected from those who opted to attend the orientation program indicated that 74.1% strongly agreed or agreed that attending orientation was an important step in their enrollment at the university. Furthermore, 79.3% of orientation program attendees strongly agreed or agreed that they gained an understanding of university academic policies at orientation. Therefore, orientation programs should remain a viable component of campus transition and retention efforts as students recognize their value and importance in their enrollment and adjustment to college.

Persistence and retention programming efforts should be diversified in order to adequately meet the needs of a myriad of college students, knowing that students may not opt to participate in some programs or place value on the social

components of such programs. It is plausible that the difference of participation and attendance in campus activities between those who attended and those who did not attend the summer orientation program is indicative of the different value that the two groups of students place on the social components of college. Programs and initiatives aimed at promoting adjustment and retention must provide opportunities for social interaction which would be appealing to students with different needs.

Nevertheless, college and university administrators, specifically orientation and transition program directors, must remain cognizant that a one-size-fits-all approach to orientation and transition programming will not suffice. A strategy might be to provide different types of orientation sessions based upon student characteristics, such as their plans for campus involvement, commuter status, employment status, or enrollment status (full-time vs. part-time). Communication with potential and newly admitted students should emphasize the importance of orientation programs and what they can expect to gain through attendance. Furthermore, programming efforts must be modified in order to yield outcomes with measurable long-term impact for attendees. Evidence must exist that participation in orientation programs was an important step in students' transition and adjustment to college.

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