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Thomas Hollins,

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Examining the Impact of a Comprehensive Approach to Student Orientation

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By Thomas J. Hollins, Jr.

Perhaps one of the most underemphasized strategies for achieving student success within the community college is the development and implementation of an intentional, comprehensive approach to orienting new students to the college environment. Orientation can be considered as any effort by an institution to help students make a successful transition from their previous environment into the collegiate experience (Upcraft & Farnsworth, 1984). The goals for such programs may include academic preparation, personal adjustment, and increasing awareness of students and parents during the transition process (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989; Cook, 1996). Although orientation programs have been part of the higher education landscape for more than one century, it was not until recent decades that these types of programs have gained in popularity and numbers.

Strumpf, Sharer, and Wawrzynski (2003) found that, between the years of 1980 and 2000, more students and parents were attending orientation programs. Hunter, Skipper, and Linder (2003) estimated that 74 percent of the institutions of higher education within the United States have an orientation course or first-year seminar. Institutions of higher education realize the value of these programs in addressing transitional issues for the many types of students enrolling in higher education. Despite the broad recognition of their potential, community colleges struggle with successfully transitioning students through orientation.

Studies have placed the first-year retention rate for community colleges at slightly less than 50 percent (Rode, 2004). The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) has not been immune to what would be considered low retention rates. Between the years of 2000 and 2004, the VCCS had a fall-to-fall retention rate ranging from 49 to 50 percent for all curricular students and 38 to 40 percent for curricular and non-curricular students (VCCS Retention Summary, 2007). Perhaps the challenge of community colleges to successfully transition and retain students in the college environment has much to do with the types of students that are enrolling in the community college. Community-college students are often first-generation and lower-ability students (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Two recent national studies highlight that community-college students enroll part time in

higher percentages and that a considerable percentage have dependents while in college (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2005; ACT, 2005).

Since 2003, two major activities have shifted the VCCS's approach to increasing student success. The first is Dateline 2009, our five-year strategic plan for improving the VCCS. Released in the fall of 2003 by Chancellor Glenn DuBois, this plan sets the standard for achieving success in seven areas, including that of student retention (VCCS Dateline 2009). As a follow up, the VCCS central office has sponsored several activities to encourage discussion and work in the area of student success among all VCCS institutions. One of these activities was the 2005 administration of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), which provided all institutions with a snapshot of how students perceived their experiences with academic programs and student services. The results of the survey generated both institutional and system-wide conversation about strategies that might be used to better engage students within the VCCS and improve student success and retention.

J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (JSRCC) participated in the 2004 administration of CCSSE. As a follow-up to the survey, JSRCC engaged in a year-long, college-wide discussion regarding activities that would better engage its students, and several initiatives were established in 2005 to address student success at JSRCC.

Destination Success

Prior to 2005-2006, JSRCC offered no pre-enrollment orientation program or intervention that gave new students an overview of the college. At that time, students had two methods by which they could enroll in courses at the college: they could either self-advise and then register online or by phone, or they could visit an advising office (Student Success Center) to receive information about placement testing and program requirements. With only these avenues of entry into the college, students often lacked comprehensive information regarding curricula requirements and had a limited understanding of course requirements. In addition, those students who opted to register in person were often faced with long lines and shorter individual advising sessions with advising specialists – especially if they registered near the start of classes. As can be imagined, this type of advising and orientation activity (or lack thereof) sometimes resulted in poor curricula choices and course selections. Students also lacked important knowledge about institutional policies, services, and resources on campus that could aid them in a successful transition into the college and ultimately the achievement of their academic goals. To improve the situation, JSRCC initiated Destination Success, a combination of a new-student orientation program entitled Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration (SOAR) and shorter orientation sessions known as

Group Advising sessions, designed to improve the advising and enrollment processes.

SOAR is a traditional new-student orientation program that provides

- a general welcome and introduction to college from an executive level officer,
- an introduction to campus life and opportunity to meet other new and upper-level students,
- a tour of the campus,
- an overview of student services, academic programs, institutional policies, and student organizations,
- academic advising that provides an overview of students' test scores with recommendations of courses based on their scores, and
- an opportunity to register for classes.

In its pilot year at the college, full-day and half-day sessions were scheduled to determine which methods were most effective for both the institution and the student.

Group Advising sessions are shorter orientation/advising sessions designed to provide students with an alternative to SOAR (based on the various backgrounds and demands of the students' schedules) and remedy the long lines usually experienced by students and staff during registration periods. These new sessions provided students and staff with an opportunity to engage in more meaningful conversation about the college experience and were strategically scheduled at various times of the day for a six-week period. Academic-advising specialists and other trained student-affairs staff led sessions of 20 to 25 students, providing them with an overview of

- their placement scores with recommended courses based on selected curricula,
- the college catalog and schedule of classes,
- JSRCC's learning-environment principles, as well as policies for student conduct and academic honesty,
- instructions for registering and paying for courses,
- institutional drop and withdrawal policies, and
- guidance in using the Student Information System and institutional email.

JSRCC recommended both programs to students. Students who participated in these activities were also strongly encouraged to enroll in the institution's College Success Skills course (SDV 100) during their first term.

SDV 100 is a one-credit orientation course intended to assist students with their transition into the institution during their first term. Specifically, the course "provides overviews of college policies, procedures, curricular offerings.

Encourages contacts with other students and staff. Assists students toward college success through information regarding effective study habits, career and academic planning, and other college resources available to students” (Virginia Community College System Master Course File, 2007). This course is required of all curricular students for graduation. However, prior to 2005, many curricular students delayed enrolling in this course for several semesters, thus reducing the potential value of the course.

Impact of Orientation on Student Success

Very little research has been conducted to show the effects of pre-college, new-student orientation programs on student success as defined by academic performance and student retention, and even fewer studies have examined the impact of these programs on the success of students within the community college. However, Busby, Gammel, and Jeffcoat (2002) found that students who participated in new-student orientation programs generally performed better academically than students who did not. Perhaps this conclusion could be explained by the notion that students who participate in orientation programs are more likely to miss fewer classes, participate in more extracurricular activities, talk with faculty and staff about personal concerns, become friends with those whose interests were different from their own, and attend lectures or panel discussions (Gentry, Kuhnert, Johnson, & Cox, 2006).

In general, students who participate in new-student orientation programs are satisfied with them (Bumgarner, Mathies, & Ranges, 1997; Booker, 2006) and believe that the programs provide good academic information and develop personal relationships (Nadler & Miller, 1997).

Over the past twenty years, numerous studies have been conducted to examine the impact of an orientation course on students’ experiences in college. Much of the research on this type of intervention focused on participation in these types of courses and its relationship with academic performance, as well as student retention and/or persistence. In terms of the impact of orientation courses on academic performance, mixed results have been found. Several studies have found significant differences in grade point averages (GPAs) between students who participated in orientation courses and those who did not (Yarbrough, 1993; Brunelle-Joiner, 1999; Starke, Harth, & Sirianni, 2001). Other studies attributed the higher GPAs of participants due to chance (Boudreau & Kromrey, 1994; Stewart, 1997; Green & Miller, 1998; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999), while some studies found non-participants to have earned higher GPAs (Prola, Rosenberg, & Wright, 1977; Mark & Romano, 1982). Suffice it to say that the literature on orientation programs and courses yielded varied results as it relates to the impact on academic performance.

The majority of the studies examining the impact of orientation courses on student retention found higher retention rates for participants in these courses, whether statistically significant (Boudreau & Kromrey, 1994; Green & Miller, 1998; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999; Hollins, 2004) or by chance (Yarbrough, 1993; Stewart, 1997; Brunelle-Joiner, 1999).

JSRCC's Study

We captured the student identification numbers of those who participated in SOAR or Group Advising in order to determine the impact of the program on student success. We also eliminated the data of students with inaccurate student identification numbers in order to ensure accurate tracking. In addition, we eliminated the data of students who had previously participated in either intervention or previously earned college credit so as to examine the impact on first-year, first-time-in-college students exclusively. We then compared the data on all first-year students who did not participate in any of the interventions with that of the participants. The data we examined covered one semester, fall to spring.

In order to determine the impact of the interventions on academic performance, we asked the following questions:

- Is there a difference in the academic performance of students who participated in SOAR and those who did not?
- Is there a difference in the academic performance of students who participated in Group Advising and those who did not?
- Is there a difference in the academic performance of students who participated in both SOAR and SDV 100 and those who did not participate in both?
- Is there a difference in the academic performance of students who participated in both Group Advising and SDV 100 and those who did not participate in both?

To assess the impact of the program on academic performance, t-tests were calculated in order to compare the mean GPAs of those students who participated in SOAR or Group Advising against those students who did not.

Secondly, we asked the following questions to determine the impact of the interventions on student retention:

- Is there a difference in the fall-to-spring retention rates of students who participated in SOAR and students who did not?
- Is there a difference in the fall-to-spring retention rates of students who participated in Group Advising and students who did not?
- Is there a difference in the fall-to-spring retention rates of students who participated in both SOAR and SDV 100 and students who did not participate in both?

- Is there a difference in the fall-to-spring retention rates of students who participated in both Group Advising and SDV 100 and students who did not participate both?

Chi-square analyses were used to assess the impact of these interventions on the re-enrollment rate of students after one semester.

Our Results

Altogether, 143 SOAR participants and 531 Group Advising participants were examined. Within these groups, the majority of the students were women (64.3 and 60.8 percent respectively), and more than 40 percent of the participants were minority. Some 282 students participated in multiple orientation interventions. Of these participants, 66 participated in both SOAR and SDV 100, while 216 participated in both Group Advising and SDV 100. Similar to the demographics of the individual interventions, both gender and ethnicity were approximately a 60 to 40 percent ratio (60 percent women, 40 percent men, and 37-40 percent minority). In general, participation in SOAR or group advising demonstrated a positive relationship as reflected in a higher GPA (see Tables 1 and 2). No statistical significance was found when comparing the groups.

Table 1. Participation in SOAR

<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean GPA</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Yes	143	2.117	1.2987	.684	.495
No	4,296	2.041	1.6324		

Table 2. Participation in Group Advising

<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean GPA</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Yes	531	2.061	1.4350	.294	.769
No	3,918	2.041	1.6462		

When comparing SOAR and Group Advising in combination with participation in SDV 100 (see Tables 3 and 4), students who participated in either a SOAR or Group Advising session in combination with SDV 100 demonstrated a higher GPA than students who did not participate in the combination of orientation interventions. Statistical significance was found when examining participation in Group Advising in combination with SDV 100 (see Table 4).

Table 3. Participation in SOAR and SDV 100

<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean GPA</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Yes	66	2.214	1.1877	1.164	.248
No	4,373	2.041	1.6283		

Table 4. Participation in Group Advising and SDV 100

<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean GPA</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Yes	216	2.270	1.3933	2.432	.016*
No	4,080	2.032	1.6329		

* Significant at .05

As it relates to student retention over one semester (fall to spring), Table 5 illustrates that students who participated in SOAR were found to be retained at a higher rate (77.6 percent) than students who did not participate in SOAR (57.9 percent). Similar results were found with students who participated in Group Advising. Students who participated in Group Advising were retained at a rate of 72.4 percent versus students who did not participate in Group Advising, for which the retention rate over one semester was 56.7 percent (see Table 6). Both assessments were found to be statistically significant.

Table 5. Spring 2006 Enrollment of SOAR Participants and Non-SOAR Participants

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Enrolled</i>	<i>Not Enrolled</i>
SOAR	143	111 (77.6%)*	32 (22.4%)*
Non-SOAR	4,296	2,489 (57.9%)	1,807 (42.1%)

* Significant at .05

Table 6. Spring 2006 Enrollment of Group Advising and Non-Group Advising Participants

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Enrolled</i>	<i>Not Enrolled</i>
Group Advising	521	377 (72.4%)*	144 (27.6%)
Non-Group Advising	3,775	2,223 (56.7%)	1,695 (43.3%)

* Significant at .05

When comparing SOAR and Group Advising in combination with participation in SDV 100, students who participated in either a SOAR or Group-Advising session and who subsequently enrolled in and completed SDV 100 demonstrated significantly higher retention rates than students who did not participate in the interventions in combination.

Table 7. Spring 2006 Enrollment of SOAR/SDV 100 Participants and Non-Participants

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Enrolled</i>	<i>Not Enrolled</i>
SOAR & SDV 100	66	58 (87.9%)*	8 (12.1%)*
Non-SOAR & SDV 100	4,373	2,542 (58.1%)	1,831 (41.9%)

* Significant at .05

Table 8. Spring 2006 Enrollment Group Advising and SDV 100 Participants and Non-Participants

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Enrolled</i>	<i>Not Enrolled</i>
Group & SDV 100	216	166 (76.9%)*	50 (23.1%)
Non-Group & SDV 100	4,223	2,434 (57.6%)	1,789 (42.4%)

* Significant at .05

Academic Performance

The results of this study are consistent with the literature on the topic of orientation and academic performance. Students who participate in orientation tend to have higher GPAs than students who do not. However, our results showed limited statistical significance. Similar to the findings in the literature, students who participate in orientation do perform better academically than students who do not participate in some orientation program, but this is more than likely by chance. Because the orientation efforts such as SOAR and Group Advising do not provide any study-skills preparation, it cannot be inferred that there is a causal relationship.

When examining the impact of the orientation interventions in combination with SDV 100, students who participated in SOAR and SDV 100 had higher GPAs than students who did not participate in both. Again these findings were consistent with the literature, in that higher GPAs were found amongst those participating in orientation programs and courses, but this is more than likely due to chance. However, Group Advising participants who enrolled in SDV 100 did demonstrate higher GPAs than students who did not participate in Group Advising alone, yielding an inconsistent finding with the literature.

Despite these findings being largely attributed to chance, the higher GPAs by participants in these interventions suggest that the academic emphasis in the content of both the program and the course may increase the likelihood of success of students in these programs and course, which legitimizes the May 2005 action of the State Board for Community Colleges to require that the course be taken within the first fifteen credits of a community-college curriculum (E. Tobian, personal communication, April 30, 2007).

This researcher recommends that SDV 100 be required within the first semester of curriculum enrollment at the community college; however, some may

argue that enforcing such a policy could impact enrollment negatively, as many students want to enroll immediately in core courses, or there are not sufficient resources to deliver the course to all first-year students. Our colleges may need to explore how these courses are marketed in order to highlight the value of these courses to students' overall college success.

Student Retention

The results of our study are consistent with the literature on student retention. Students who participate in orientation programs and courses tend to be retained at rates significantly higher than students who do not. Perhaps much of the impact can be attributed to students becoming familiar with the programs and services that are introduced to them during orientation sessions and lectures within SDV 100 courses, as well as the personal connections that they make with faculty, staff, and students who participate in these programs and courses, which engenders comfort and confidence in students in seeking assistance when needed.

Some limitations to this study include a low number of students who participated in SOAR and SDV 100 (66), which makes generalizing this study to other institutions difficult. Despite the low numbers, data suggest that there is value in using multiple interventions to help students transition into the community college. In addition to the low numbers of students who participated in SOAR and SDV 100, the results only provide data over one semester. Additional research needs to be conducted over extended periods of time, to include fall-to-fall results, two-year results, and three-year results.

Recommendations

As it relates to implementation of this approach elsewhere, community colleges should examine the development of pre-college new-student orientation programs. Pre-college or new-student orientation programs offer the opportunity to become familiar with institutions and their campus culture so that students have references with whom they can connect if they may need assistance or want to become involved. In addition to developing new-student orientation programs on campuses, VCCS colleges should require new students to enroll in SDV 100 within their first semester of enrollment. If this is a challenge to enrollment or resources, institutions should explore requiring this combination of interventions to targeted groups of students based on pre-enrollment characteristics (such as placement test scores). When combined, these interventions may provide students with a better opportunity at achieving success within their first year and may lead to an increase in graduation.

VCCS student-affairs professionals should continue to examine this approach to transitioning students into college. As a result of this study, questions

have been developed related to the quality, long-term impact, and effectiveness of these types of interventions delivered in different modes. Because this study examined fall-to-spring retention rates, additional studies should examine the long-term impact of these types of interventions within the VCCS over a one-year (fall to fall) and two-year period. Further investigation should focus on underrepresented student populations within the VCCS. For instance, researchers might ask how these types of programs impact student success amongst a particular population. Also, qualitative studies should be conducted to understand the various nuances of such programs and how they might influence student success in college. Finally, research should be conducted on the growing area of online orientation programs and online SDV 100, as recommended by Tighe (2006).

In conducting research on the impact of multiple orientation interventions on student success, as defined by academic performance and student retention within the VCCS, this study has found that there is tremendous potential in increasing student success through the delivery of new student orientation programs when combined with orientation courses such as SDV 100. Institutions would best serve themselves and students by offering these types of options as well as requiring such interventions based on pre-college (and other) characteristics such as placement test scores.

Dr. Thomas N. Hollins, Jr. serves as associate vice president of student affairs at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College.

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