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AN EX POST FACTO STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENT ORIENTATION AS AN INDICATOR OF STUDENT SUCCESS AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

BY DR. AMANDA ELLIS-O'QUINN

While community colleges do an excellent job of fulfilling their open door mission, research shows that the completion rate for community college students is dismal (Forde, 2002). One retention strategy often employed

“A great deal of research has focused on orientation at the four-year level, but a major deficit exists in examining orientation at the community college level. There is a lack of current research... to indicate whether orientation programs are achieving desired results.”

by community colleges is providing support through orientation programs. An orientation course, usually designed to provide students with tools needed for social and academic integration to the institution, is also one of the most common methods used by colleges and universities to address attrition and retention (Cueso, 1997). However, few orientation programs are appraised objectively to determine whether or not they have achieved the intended outcome

of student retention (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007). If orientation programs can prove effective as a retention and student success tool, it is important to understand how these programs can best be utilized (Marcotte et al., 2005; Sax et al., 2000).

A great deal of research has focused on orientation at the four-year level, but a major deficit exists in examining orientation at the community college level (Barefoot, 2000; Zeidenberg et al., 2007). There is a lack of current research, especially at the community college level, to indicate whether orientation programs are achieving desired results. Furthermore, quantitative research examining orientation at a rural community college is not available. The purpose of this ex post facto study is to determine if a relationship exists between certain student success indicators such as GPA, and retention for students completing an orientation course in their first semester at a rural community college. In addition, the study will attempt to identify the impact of course delivery format on success measures. The independent variables tested included the students' participation or non-participation in orientation.

In addition, the delivery format (two-day, ten-week, or distance education) served as an independent variable for students who participated in SDV. The dependent variables representing student success are retention from the Fall to Spring Semesters and grade point average (GPA). Covariates included the students' gender, age, ethnicity, and placement test scores. Statistically controlling the covariates allowed for the possible emergence of relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variables. The researcher analyzed historical data from the past three years from the study's population.

Background

The community college in this study, Southwest Virginia Community College (SVCC), requires students to take orientation; however, students may take orientation at any time. Students self select which semester they will enroll in the course. The teaching methods examined include traditional (ten-week), seminar (two-day), and distance learning (the entire semester). The traditional format meets once a week for ten consecutive weeks. A seminar format allows the students to meet in person two days prior to the beginning of the semester. More recently, an added distance education format allows students to work at their own pace throughout the entire semester. Although advantages of the various formats have been speculated, the benefits are unknown.

Although similar research has been conducted (Zeidenberg, Jenkins & Calgano, 2007), a gap exists in examining the relationship between participation in orientation and retention and GPA at community colleges. Zeidenberg, Jenkins & Calgano studied students at a Florida community college, and found a significant relationship between students enrolling in orientation and completing a credential. However, this study only examined the percentage of these students who completed a credential (a certificate or an associate degree). Because of the broad mission of community colleges, student success cannot be measured alone by the completion of a credential. In this study, measurement of retention is defined by continuous enrollment from Fall, the students' first semester, into the subsequent Spring Semester, because the requirements for community college curriculum vary dramatically from certificate programs to Associates degrees.

Participants

Previous research has mainly focused on the relationship between participation in orientation and student success without controlling certain confounding variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, and placement test scores. To control for such variables, the sample was limited to full-time students, regardless of major, enrolling in their first semester of college (excluding dual enrollment) in the Fall Semesters of 2006, 2007, and 2008.

Participants comprised two groups: one, students who enrolled in orientation during their first Fall Semester of attendance and two, students who did not enroll in orientation during their first Fall Semester of attendance. Students enrolled in the SDV course by self-enrolling or through an advisor/counselor. However, it is up to the students to choose the format in which they will enroll. Although it is suggested that students enroll in a SDV course within their first fifteen credit hours, this is not enforced through mandatory enrollment. Students have complete discretion as to when they will enroll in the course.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do the grade point averages (GPA) of community college students taking orientation their first semester compare to the GPA of their counterpart, who are not taking orientation their first semester?
2. To what degree are community college first-year students who take orientation their first semester retained in the subsequent semester, in comparison with their counterparts who do not take orientation their first semester?
3. To what degree does the delivery format used to complete orientation affect retention and grade point averages?

Data Collection and Analysis

The Student Information System (SIS) provided the data through a primary source. Analysis was completed with SPSS. Confounding variables included gender, age, placement test scores, and ethnicity. A data analysis was conducted utilizing an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and logistic regression. The inclusion of confounding variables or covariates in the statistical analysis provided a means of control for the observed variation between the groups, caused not by the treatment itself, but other demographic factors.

Results

The analyses indicated that the majority of first-semester students attending college for the first time do not elect to take orientation during their first semester of enrollment. Of these students, those enrolling in orientation have a slight preference for the two-day course over the ten-week course; however, students have a clear preference for the two-day and ten-week course over the distance learning course. The study population was similar to the overall student body population in regard to the demographics of gender, age, ethnicity, and placements test scores. The total n used for data analysis

was 1,396. Although a much larger group of students participated in SDV in 2006, 2007, and 2008, many students were eliminated to control for certain characteristics (must be a full-time and first-time student).

Findings concluded that students who did enroll in an orientation course their first semester were not more likely to reenroll in the Spring Semester, in comparison to the students who did not enroll in an orientation course. This finding contradicts much of the literature which shows a significant relationship between orientation enrollment and retention.

A significant relationship does exist between enrollment in orientation and GPA. Although enrollment in orientation is significant to GPA, the format of orientation is not significant. In addition, the format of orientation was not found to be significant to retention. Significant findings include that younger students were more likely to reenroll in the spring term when compared to older students. In regard to the success measures of GPA and retention through spring enrollment, there was a significant relationship between these variables. The participants who had higher GPAs were more likely to be retained in the spring semester. This relationship seems to be well established in the literature (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980).

An inadvertent finding of this study that should be mentioned is that a significant relationship did not exist between the students' English and math placement scores and retention. In addition, English placement scores are not significant in predicting GPA. These findings are troubling, considering the English and math placement tests are supposed to be indicators of student success. This study did not include the exploration of a relationship between these variables and student success. However, it seems these results are an indicator of incongruence in the placement tests and their ability to predict student success. Due to lack of literature focusing on rural community colleges, the researchers are unable to support or refute similar studies.

Implications for Community College Leaders and Administrators

As stated by Barefoot and Gardener (1993) and Cohen and Jody (1978), the purpose of a college orientation course is to help students become more successful in college. Because orientation classes are often not seen as part of the academic curriculum, failure to evaluate such programs is not unique to the school in this study. It is the responsibility of community college leaders and administrators to make the evaluation of orientation courses and programs an institutional priority. Results from studies such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2008), the Florida Department of Education (2005), Zeidenberg, et al. (2007), Marcotte et al. (2005), and Zimmerman (2000) indicate that students who were enrolled in an orientation course were

retained and succeeded at a much higher rate than their counterparts who were not enrolled in an orientation course. The findings of this research differ in regards to retention. Conflicting findings signal the need for evaluation to occur at individual institutions. It is the responsibility of community college leaders and administrators to prompt such evaluation.

Since community college faculty are not required to conduct research, a paucity of literature exists focusing on community colleges. As pointed out by this study, a lack of research exists specifically in the area of community college orientation. Even though community college faculty, staff, and practitioners are not required to conduct research, in order to validate their pedagogy they should pursue research. Specifically, those community college faculty, staff, and practitioners involved in orientation programs should evaluate such programs for effectiveness. Additional research should compare delivery formats. This study was unique in that it did compare different formats of community college orientation. As Cuesco (1997) points out, orientation is possibly the most studied course in American higher education; however, only a few studies exist comparing orientation formats at the community college level. Best practices should be shared in hopes of promoting student success.

Considering the necessary resources for an orientation program, students and other constituents contributing funds should see a return on their investment. If students have the option of choosing between delivery formats, they should be informed of success rates. Considering the results of this study, administrators should advise students at the institution studied that there is not a difference in the success rates produced by the different formats. In addition, if orientation programs do not increase student retention, students should question policies that force them to spend tuition dollars on such programs. This study only focused on student success from one semester into the concurrent semester and cannot provide explanations for this leveling-off of academic performance in the second semester. Further studies attempting to answer this question are warranted, particularly longitudinal studies examining the relationship between student success and orientation courses.

Conclusion

It is possible that these results of this study are more unique to rural community colleges. Since 1970, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education has utilized a classification of colleges and universities (McCormick & Zhao, 2005). The classification of rural, suburban, or urban-serving is based on the physical location of institutions within Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas (PMSAs) or Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs). Based on Carnegie Classifications, Southwest Virginia Community College is a rural

medium sized two-year college. One prominent purpose for this classification system is so the need for diversity in research can be realized. What holds true for an urban school might not hold true for a rural school, due to the extreme differences in characteristics. Characteristics of rural areas often include high levels of illiteracy, low levels of educational attainment, high unemployment, and extreme poverty (Murray, 2007). As indicated by the Carnegie Classifications (1970), rural colleges serve a unique population. The 2009 qualitative study conducted by O’Gara, Karp, and Hughes echoes this point. A lack of literature investigating student success courses at a rural community college presents a problem.

This researcher is unable to support or refute similar studies due to the lack of literature focusing on rural community colleges. The researcher strongly recommends that this study be replicated at other rural schools, particularly at the sister community colleges located in the same geographic region as the school in this study.

Orientation programs were created to answer a need in higher education. Research consistently reminds practitioners that the need is imminent. It is risky and careless for institutions to provide student success tools without validating their efficacy. Particularly at the community college level, where the population is more “at-risk,” students need reliable success tools. If orientation courses are not serving their intended purpose, then higher education must rethink the place of orientation in the higher education curriculum. As higher education has become more diversified, it is important that colleges constantly evaluate student success courses in various settings. It is not safe to assume that what once worked will continue to work, or what works at four-year institutions will work at community colleges.

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