



AN ORIENTATION COURSE AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE RETENTION

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Orientation and retention programs are common in institutions of higher education. The potential association between orientation programs and student retention, particularly within the community college sector, has long been neglected. This study presents an institutional view of a potential associative relationship between an orientation course and student retention measures. A chi-square analysis revealed a significant association among orientation program, student completion of degree, student retention, and student enrollment and persistence.

The study of retention is important for colleges and universities. An institution's retention rate can influence its ranking in college guides and other mediums of popular press, with the implication that the higher the retention rate, the higher quality of education (Astin, 1993, 1997; Wyman, 1997). Retention rates also can serve, in some states, as a benchmark for state allocated funding (Borrego, 2002; Sydow, 1998), again suggesting that the greater the institutional retention, the greater the institutional effectiveness. Although this is not an exhaustive listing of reasons regarding the importance of retention studies, these are two of the more predominant issues discussed within the literature. While there are studies of retention trends and issues within four-year public and private institution, few such studies concerning retention exist at the community college level.

Community Colleges are referred to as “revolving door” institutions. Students can enter into a community college to take classes for the purpose of obtaining a two-year transferable degree or a terminal

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certificate, enhancing general job skills, or for personal enrichment. Because students may have various distinct goals for entering into a community college, tracking and studying retention becomes much more difficult than it would be in a four-year public or private university, where students' one primary goal is solidified around obtaining a bachelor's degree. Hence, understanding students' goals at the community college level and how those goals may drive the retention train becomes paramount for community colleges, much more so than for four-year institutions (Mohommadi, 1996; Sydow, 1998).

Further complicating the study of community college retention is the lack of concise definitions for retention criteria (Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987; Wild & Ebbs, 2002). While there are several retention models for four-year public and private universities, similar models do not exist for community colleges. Astin, Korn and Green (1987) and Astin (1997) uses a model consisting of three retention criteria to evaluate retention efforts within four-year universities (see also Dey & Astin, 1993). The criteria used (from most stringent to least stringent) are:

1. Whether the student received a bachelor's degree by a pre-determined date.
2. Whether the student received a bachelor's degree, completed four years of college, or remained enrolled at the university by a pre-determined date.

For clarity, a number of terms concerning retention within community colleges (Astin et al., 1987; Wild & Ebbs, 2002) require definition. "Retention" exists, generally, when students remain at the institution for the duration of their studies (that is, until they graduate). In contrast, "attrition" refers to students leaving an institution prior to graduation. So if an institution has high attrition, that school's student retention is low. The term "drop-out" denotes a student who has permanently left the institution. In the literature, drop-outs are assumed to have been academically underprepared. A puzzling issue regarding drop-outs, however, is that this view fails to consider those students who were academically prepared (and indeed academically successful), but left the institution because that institution failed to meet the student's academic needs. This latter type of drop-out would be much more likely to occur in a community college setting than in a four-year institution, since it is not uncommon for community college students to drop out for the purpose of enrolling in a four-year program. A third type of student can be categorized as a "stop-out." Stop-outs are similar to drop-outs in that they leave an institution prior to graduation. The key that distinguishes a stop-out from a drop-out is

that the former will eventually re-enroll in their original institution. That is, the student takes a short-term hiatus from his or her studies. Finally, “persistent” students are those students who obtain a degree, but do so over an extended (non-traditional) period of time.

Along with retention-specific jargon, there are specific theories regarding retention. Tinto (1975) and Astin (1984) and Astin, Korn, and Green (1987) lead the theoretical retention charge, although the former has come under considerable fire over the last several years because his model of student attrition appears to “rely on researchers’ subjective conceptualizations” (Brunsden, Davies, Shelvin, & Bracken, 2000). Research regarding Tinto’s model suggests that it does not provide satisfactory results because researchers tend to utilize only parts of the model and not the whole model (Brunsden et al., 2000; Mutter, 1992). When assessing Tinto’s model globally, Brunsden, Davies, Shelvin, and Bracken (2000) found discrepancies between their research and previous research.

Astin’s Student Involvement theory is prominent in the literature of retention (Astin, 1984; Astin et al., 1987; Reisberg, 1999; Richmond, 1986; Sydow, 1998; Tinto, 1989; Wild & Ebbs, 2002). His theory states that as students increase their physical and emotional investment on their college campus, their rate of retention increases. Such investments include, but are not limited to, residential living, involvement in student government and other clubs, participation in campus activities, and contact with faculty and administration. The basic tenet of involvement theory is that the successful student is an active participant in the process of learning rather than a passive observer.

In addition to retention theories, the literature identifies several “retention variables” that have been strong predictors of retention: high school GPA, admissions test scores (ACT and or SAT), gender, and race (Astin, 1997; Astin et al., 1987; Tinto, 1975). High school GPAs and admission test scores are positively related to retention rates. Women seem to have higher retention rates when considering those students who complete their degrees within four years, whereas men tend to have higher retention rates when considering those students who persist over the long term to complete a degree or stay enrolled beyond the four year period (Astin et al., 1987).

Information on ethnic differences in retention trends is scarce. The literature does, however, suggest some strategies for increasing the retention of minority students. Predominately white institutions are urged to consider having extra outreach services for minority students (Gabrielle, 2002; Magner, 1989), be cognizant about creating an environment that is welcoming for minority students (Magner, 1989), and lessen barriers for minority student success (Parker, 1997, 1999).

Other environmental factors influencing retention are: student major field of study, residential hall living, and institutional size (Astin, 1997), as well as high school class rank, prep class enrollment, working more than 20 hours a week, and a late application (Astin, 1984; Reisberg, 1999; Sydow, 1998). An important institutional environmental factor involves faculty participation and or faculty interaction with their students. A number of studies either explicitly state or strongly imply that faculty participation is paramount to student retention (Evangelauf, 1990; Parker, 1997, 1999; Roach, 1999; Tinto, 1989).

Although two existing studies address classroom attrition (Carnevale, 2002; Waschull, 2001), there are no existing studies that address how specific classes affect institutional attrition. One specific type of class that might be considered is an orientation class. Orientation classes are designed to acclimate students to the campus environment and allow them the opportunity to meet other students, faculty, and administrators. The question arises, then, do students enrolled in orientation classes experience a higher rate of retention than students who are not enrolled? Further, would students enrolled in orientation courses be more likely obtain a degree within the predetermined amount of time and to be retained at this community college when they take an orientation course than students who do not take an orientation course?

METHOD

The sample utilized for this study consisted of 7,466 matriculants attending a Midwestern community college from fall semester 1999 through spring semester 2002. The median age of the students was 24. There was an approximately equal gender balance (53% women), and varied ethnicity (85% White, 9% Hispanic, 3% Black, 1.1% Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.6% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 1.2% other ethnicity).

As discussed previously, at the community college level, students' goals can influence retention. Unlike four-year universities where the unifying goal is to graduate with a degree, community college students may seek to obtain a degree or they may merely wish to enroll in an occasional class (e.g., for personal enrichment). Because of these issues, it becomes important to specifically define the retention measures for a community college.

Using Astin's (1997) model of retention as a roadmap, the following operational definitions were developed for this study:

1. "Successful" students have completed the requirements of a transferable degree within a two-year period.

2. "Drop-outs" completed less than three semesters of coursework within a two-year period, had a three or more course load average, and had a GPA less than 2.0 (on a 4-point scale).
3. "Stop-outs" completed three or more semesters of coursework, had a three or more course load average, had a GPA greater than 2.0 (on a 4-point scale), and also re-enrolled after an enrollment break of 1, 2 or 3 semesters.
4. "Persistent" students had a three or more course load average and completed four semesters of course work within the two-year period without completing the requirements for a transferable degree.

This study was initiated to assess the relationship between taking an orientation course and (a) students' success in obtaining a transferable degree within a specified two-year time period, (b) student drop-out, (c) student re-enrollment after brief enrollment breaks (stopping-out), and (d) student persistence.

Taken by newly entering and reverse transfer students, the orientation course taken by students in this study can be described as a course designed to facilitate self-development through a variety of exercises and activities that relate to their personal and educational development. Meeting in small groups, students are provided an opportunity to examine their abilities, aptitudes, interests, values, and attitudes, and to explore how these and other factors relate to their personal and educational development. This course assists students in their transition into the college environment, encourages success and attainment of goals, and seeks to foster relationships that will help facilitate this success. The course objectives are to: (a) examine ways to create a successful and satisfying experience in college, (b) familiarize students with college resources, services, policies, and organizations, (c) build a network of support to enhance academic success, (d) develop an academic plan outlining the courses necessary to attain individual goals, (e) develop an awareness of the career development and decision making process, and (f) encourage personal and student development. Students have the option to take this orientation course during the day, at night, on the Internet as well as in one week condensed sessions. Only those students identified as having taken the orientation course during the daytime offerings were selected for this study.

In an attempt to meet the course objectives, students were allowed to work in small groups, challenged to set personal and professional goals, and worked directly with an academic counselor one-on-one to establish an academic plan. Also, administrators and staff members

are scheduled to come and present to the students about their individual departments and the services they provide.

For the purposes of this study, the data for regular (non-transfer) and transfer students were analyzed separately (because it might be argued that transfer students are inherently more transient than non-transfer students). Students who transfer in 16 credit hours or more are exempt from taking the orientation course and could create a bias in the data analysis. Therefore, data cases were identified and separated into two groups; non-reverse transfer students (with less than 16 hours transferred) and reverse transfer students (with 16 credit hours or more transferred).

After separating students into non-reverse transfer students and reverse transfer students, a Pearson chi-square analysis was used to assess whether there was a relationship between each of the four retention measures and one's enrollment in the orientation course.

To reduce time-dependent effects, the sample was separated into three cohorts. The first cohort consisted of students who initially enrolled in the fall of 1999. This cohort was tracked through the spring of 2001. The second cohort consisted of students who first enrolled in the fall of 2000, and this cohort was tracked through the spring of 2002. The third cohort consisted of first enrolled in the fall of 1998. Cohort 3 was tracked through the spring of 2002.

RESULTS

Non-Reverse Transfer Students

For the first cohort of non-reverse transfer students, a Pearson Chi-Square revealed a significant association between orientation course enrollment and degree attainment, $\chi^2(1) = 1143.167$; $p < .001$. A greater proportion of students who took the orientation course obtained their degrees than did those students who did not take the orientation course.

A significant relationship also was found when the dependent variable of dropping out was considered, $\chi^2(1) = 150.076$; $p < .001$. A greater proportion of students who took the orientation course did not fit the "drop-out" criteria and, conversely, those students who did take the enrollment course were less likely to drop out.

For the outcome of stopping out, a significant association with orientation course enrollment was also identified, $\chi^2(1) = 45.358$; $p < .001$. Students who took the orientation course tended to re-enroll after taking a one, two, or three semester break in enrollment, whereas students who did not take the orientation course were less

likely to re-enroll after a one, two, or three semester break in their enrollment.

A significant relationship also was found when persistence was considered, $\chi^2(1) = 766.508$; $p < .001$. Students who did not take the orientation course were less apt to persist, whereas students who did take the orientation course persisted over time. Thus, even though these students did not obtain their degree within the specified time period, they continued to maintain enrollment.

In a similar manner to the above analyses, Pearson Chi-Square analyses were used to determine if significant course/retention relationships existed for the second and third cohorts. As Table 1 indicates, for each outcome measure, a significant association with course enrollment was found. The nature of these relationships was the same as identified with the first cohort.

For the third cohort, a four-year span of time was considered. As Table 1 indicates, analysis revealed the same significant relationships that were found with cohorts 1 and 2.

Reverse Transfer Students

For the reasons mentioned previously, separate analyses were carried out for reverse transfer students. For the first cohort of reverse transfer students, a Pearson chi-square failed to find significance for success ($p = .093$), stopping-out ($p = .525$), and persistence ($p = .234$). A significant effect was found, however,

TABLE 1 Pearson Chi-Square Values for the Effect of Orientation Course (Non-Transfer Students)

Measure	Cohort	Chi-square	<i>p</i>
Success	1	1143.2	.001
	2	838.8	.001
	3	1236.4	.001
Drop-out	1	150.1	.001
	2	168.9	.001
	3	190.9	.001
Stop-out	1	45.4	.001
	2	39.9	.001
	3	55.0	.001
Persistence	1	766.5	.001
	2	654.1	.001
	3	844.1	.001

when the drop-out outcome was considered, $\chi^2(1) = 11.135$; $p < .001$. A smaller proportion of students who took the orientation course dropped out, and conversely a greater proportion of those students who did not take the orientation course dropped out.

Analysis of the second cohort showed no significant association with orientation course enrollment when stopping out ($p = .966$) and persistence ($p = .406$) were considered. Significant associations were found, however, for the drop out criterion, $\chi^2(1) = 8.790$; $p < .01$, and for the success outcome, $\chi^2(1) = 4.251$; $p < .05$.

For the second cohort, students enrolled in the orientation course were less likely to drop out, and a greater proportion of students who took the orientation course were successful, whereas those students who did not take the orientation course did not fit the success criteria.

The four-year analysis, cohort 3, resembled the findings of the first and second cohorts, with a significant course association with dropping out, but no such relationship with success, stopping out or persistence (see Table 2).

DISCUSSION

This study assessed the association between orientation course enrollment and student retention (using four distinct retention measures). It appears that associations exist between taking an orientation course and student retention, particularly with respect to associate degree attainment within the two-year traditional time

TABLE 2 Pearson Chi-Square Values for the Effect of Orientation Course (Transfer Students)

Measure	Cohort	Chi-square	<i>p</i>
Success	1	2.8	.093
	2	4.2	.039
	3	2.6	.106
Drop-out	1	11.1	.001
	2	8.7	.01
	3	12.6	.001
Stop-out	1	.40	.525
	2	.00	.966
	3	.29	.589
Persistence	1	1.4	.234
	2	.69	.406
	3	.89	.343

frame. Moreover, enrollment in such an orientation course could aid in deterring students from dropping out, assisting students in wanting to re-enroll after stopping out, and helping students persist beyond the traditional time frame to earn a degree.

For those students identified as non-reverse transfer students, enrollment in the orientation course was associated with graduating within the two-year time frame. Greater proportions of students dropped out and did not take the orientation course, while greater proportions of students who took the orientation course re-enrolled after brief breaks in enrollment and persisted beyond the traditional two year period for degree obtainment.

When considering reverse transfer students, a finding consistent across the cohorts was an association between orientation course enrollment and student dropping-out. Greater proportions of students who took the orientation course did not fit into the drop-out category. In contrast, although an association between the orientation course and success for students in Cohort 2 might exist, no association was found to exist between the course and student retention over all, as in the case of Cohort 3.

Student Involvement theory (Magner, 1989; Parker, 1999) may provide answers to how a potential associative relationship might exist between an orientation course and student retention for the non-transfer students. As mentioned previously, Student Involvement theory suggests that as students increase their physical and emotional investment on their college campus, their rate of retention increases.

Keeping with the goal of most orientation programs, it may be that this orientation course helps students acclimate to campus life. The very foundation of this orientation course is structured to allow students to meet other students, learn about the many different offices and services available for them on campus, as well as allowing them to set personal goals and help them realize the best way(s) to achieve these goals. Participation in this course may allow students to understand the campus better, and in this way help them to make the necessary physical and emotional investment in campus life.

Unlike this orientation course, most retention programs and initiatives focus on students who are academically underprepared (Congos & Schoeps, 1997; Gabrielle, 2002; Parker, 1999; Roach, 1999; Snell & Makeis, 1993). Although it is important to address the need of those students identified as underprepared, community colleges in particular should have effective programs and initiatives that focus on students who are collegiately prepared. Community colleges deal with the double edged sword of losing their students who are prepared academically for four-year public and private universities before they

have attained a transferable degree, while at the same time losing those students who may drop-out because of insufficient remediation. As is the case of this orientation course, community college retention programs and initiatives should be college-wide initiatives (Gabrielle, 2002; Magner, 1989; Parker, 1997).

A potential confound, or bias, in this study is the defining of retention measures. A substantial discussion among professionals seems to be whether to use GPA when defining retention measures. Tinto (in Evangelauf, 1990) contends that it is impossible to assess retention with quantitative data such as arbitrarily designating students as drop-outs contingent upon their GPA. A universal definition of what it means to be a drop-out is also non-existent (Snell & Makeis, 1993). While Astin suggests that professionals would be better served with qualitative data in the field of retention studies, he admits that such research is highly labor intensive and few professionals have the resource power to effectively conduct it. The need for research regarding retention is great (Snell & Makeis, 1993; Wyman, 1997). Only through research, both qualitative and quantitative, will professionals more fully understand the phenomena of retention and attrition within community college sectors.

One caveat regarding this study is that the chi square tests are a "global goodness of fit" regarding association between variables. While potential associative relationships might exist between this orientation course and the outlined student retention measures, causal relations cannot necessarily be inferred because random assignment of students to the orientation course was not possible. Although much more difficult to implement, experimental research on community college retention could help to shed more light on the issues and findings presented here.

Finally, the retention model used here focuses on those students who have indicated that they are working toward a transferable degree. It is important to understand that this is but one small piece of the retention pie for a community college. It might be argued, for example, that the retention of certificate-seeking students is just as important as the retention of those students seeking transferable degrees. Students who participate in corporate and community courses might also be viewed as equally important contestants in the retention race.

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