

Taylor University

Pillars at Taylor University

Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE)
Theses

Graduate Theses

2017

Benefits and Level of Satisfaction a First-Year Orientation Program Delivers for Freshmen in College

Katie Evensen
Taylor University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Evensen, Katie, "Benefits and Level of Satisfaction a First-Year Orientation Program Delivers for Freshmen in College" (2017). *Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE) Theses*. 92.
<https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe/92>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Theses at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE) Theses by an authorized administrator of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

BENEFITS AND LEVEL OF SATISFACTION A FIRST-YEAR ORIENTATION
PROGRAM DELIVERS FOR FRESHMEN IN COLLEGE

A thesis

Presented to

The school of Social Sciences, Education & Business
Department of Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Katie Evensen

May 2017

© Katie Evensen 2017

**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Katherine Marie Evensen

entitled

Benefits and Level of Satisfaction a First-Year Orientation
Program Delivers for Freshmen in College

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2017

Todd Reem, Ph.D. Date
Thesis Supervisor

Scott Gaier, Ph.D. Date
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

Tim Herrmann, Ph.D. Date
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

Tim Herrmann, Ph.D. Date
Director, M.A. in Higher Education and Student Development

Abstract

Freshmen beginning their undergraduate education enter with various backgrounds and understanding of what college expectations will be. Institutions must properly ease first-year students into this new transition in their life. One way to help a first-year student transitioning into college is with a first-year orientation program. First-year orientation programs provide unique space for students to adjust well to their institution. Orientation provides time prior to the academic year beginning to allow first-year students to meet their peers, better understand the transition into college, become familiar with campus, feel comfortable with interacting with faculty, staff and administration, and learn more about one's self and others in a large or small group setting. Orientation provides all of these benefits to first-year students because of various available avenues, such as programming opportunities and small group settings with other first-year students. Orientation allows first-year students to better know themselves, their peers, and the campus culture before beginning the academic year. Institutionally, orientation programs highly benefit first-year students and are utilized nationally across various institution types.

Acknowledgements

Being able to successfully say, “I’ve finished my thesis” are words that I have only dreamt of. Now, these words are a dream come true. Only the Lord could have gotten me this far; in my Master’s program, in education as a whole, and in the position I am in today. I thank Him above all, because He alone is my strength even when I felt like quitting.

I am beyond grateful for my family. My mom, dad, and sister each have encouraged me this past year and a half throughout this thesis writing process. Having such a support system in my family has been incredibly encouraging and needed. Without them and their random texts saying, “you got this”, or “here is a Starbucks gift card — go finish that thesis”, I wouldn’t have had the strength to finish this successfully. Thank you for showing me what hard work and perseverance look like. I love you all so much. No one can replace family.

I also want to thank my friends who have helped to shape me throughout this process. Long distance friendships from undergrad existed throughout this time, and they truly only grew stronger. Thank you Erika for the joy and honesty you constantly brought to me through our phone conversations; Tyler, for your encouraging words when I felt I was at my lowest-of-lows here in grad school; Karly, for the random phone calls and disagreements we have had throughout our 13 years of friendship - those conversations have shaped who we are as friends. For those friends who weren’t

mentioned, you know who you are, and I thank you for modeling Christ's love, forgiveness and grace on me. Thank you each for reminding me who I am IN CHRIST; not in myself, not in the world, not in what others think of me, but in Christ alone.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Necessity and Assessment of First-Year Orientation Programs	2
Impact of a First-Year Orientation Program	3
Chapter 2 Literature Review	5
Purpose Overview of Pre-Semester Orientation Programs	5
Transition and Adjustment to the University as a Whole	6
Increased Interaction with Faculty	8
Retention, Connectedness, and Orientation	10
Orienting the Family to College	13
Greater Understanding of Peers and Self	13
Conclusion	17
Chapter 3 Methodology	19
Context, Background, and Participants	19
Procedures	21
Analysis	21
Chapter 4 Results	23
Relationships Formed	23

Trust Developed for the Year to Come	27
Overall Ease and Adjustment into the First Year of College	32
Conclusion	34
Chapter 5 Discussion	36
Review of Findings	36
Research Limitations.....	37
Implications for Future Research and Practitioners.....	39
Conclusion.....	41
References.....	42
Appendix A: Informed Consent	48
Appendix B: Interview Questions	53

Chapter 1

Introduction

“[The] main benefit [of an institution requiring students to attend a first-year experience orientation program] would be that participation in orientation increases probability of the student being successful. [It] reduces anxiety, provides socialization and important initial information. [It also] increases comfort level [and] hopefully raises academic expectations for engagement.”
(J. N. Gardner, personal communication, November 7, 2015)

A first-year seminar course is defined as “one-of-a-kind class designed to help incoming students make the transition from high school to a [global research] university” (Chavez, 2015, para.1). Although this aspect of a first-year student's experience is important, an institution’s first-year orientation program is also critical in the development and acclimation of first-year students. Overall, many benefits await a student who attends an orientation program.

Orientation programs at four-year institutions differ depending on the type of institution, design of the orientation program, and campus culture. Additionally, the amount of student-faculty interaction often varies based on the institution’s size and its student-faculty ratio. According to Singer (2003), a university’s summer orientation program has the opportunity and privilege to “convey realistic expectations for college life” (p. 52). As a result, institutions have the unique opportunity to help create a safe space through an orientation program within the first few weeks of the fall semester for incoming students.

Necessity and Assessment of First-Year Orientation Programs

Scholars have identified various benefits of orientation programs for first-year students, including easing into college life; increasing comfort with interaction among peers and faculty; raising individual retention rates; and better understanding one's self as well as the perspectives of others. Larmar and Ingamells (2010) found, "Recent research has identified a number of key predictors of success that serve to enhance the first-year university experience" (p. 211). Thus, the hope of providing a first-year orientation experience program is to help deliver those key predictors to ensure the first-year of college for each student is successful.

First-year orientation programs must be implemented prior to a first-year student's fall semester of college for the purpose of providing an organized time for students to transition and accommodate to college life, while supplying a "comprehensive and intentional approach to the first college year" (Hunter, 2006, p. 6). Orientation provides the option for purposeful spaces and opportunities in which first-year students can connect and interact before their fall semester begins.

One goal of an orientation program is to provide the opportunity for first-year students to engage with the university as a whole prior to their academic courses beginning. According to Kuh's (2007) study on the success of first-year students, "Both students and institutions must share the responsibility for redressing this deplorable state of affairs" (para. 16). Kuh then noted some of the issues that contribute to the current success of first-year students: retention, success, and pre-college readiness.

Universities can address current issues in their orientation programs in various ways while still seeking to deliver success to first-year students. John N. Gardner (2015),

senior fellow for the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, specializes in research on first-year experience for orientation programs. He addresses the following questions that institutions should consider when evaluating their respective orientation programs: “What is the orientation program’s purpose and is it beyond retention? What are the university’s big ideas? Does the institution have a philosophy? How can the university create an excellent first year for their students? What can the institution improve? And lastly, what does excellence mean?” (pp. 41–42).

These assorted research questions can be asked of universities across the country and are appropriate in addressing and assessing current-day trends regarding orientation programs. Institutions need to take time when assessing their first-year orientation programs, not only to acknowledge past successes but also to assess what must change and transform for the betterment of first-year students.

Impact of a First-Year Orientation Program

The impact a first-year orientation program has on first-year students is measured in many ways, including the overall benefit it delivers to each incoming freshman class. A high possibility exists for first-year students to transfer out of their respective universities after their first year due to various factors; therefore, “Interventions must occur during the freshman college year to be the most effective” (Brown, 2012, p. 7). Understanding what possible interventions can occur is imperative for universities. This intervention could either include a required orientation program or an optional orientation program provided for all first-year students.

According to Miller, Dyer, and Nadler (2002), the common overall goals for any orientation program are to “build retention, foster academic skills, provide opportunities for peer-interaction, encourage student maturation and development, and among other things, provide a cultural awareness and broadening world view” (p. 51). Therefore, the following questions guided this research:

1. What are the main benefits for first-year students attending an orientation program prior to the school year beginning?
2. How satisfied are first-year students once they have completed their institutions orientation program?

Institutions have the opportunity to impact the incoming freshman class each year. The influence institutions often have on first-year students is immense, and researchers must continue to understand the specific benefits first-year students can gain from attending a first-year experience orientation program. Several benefits exist from attending an orientation program, particularly for students looking to grow developmentally, emotionally, and socially. These benefits are explored in Chapter 2 through an in-depth review of past research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Purpose Overview of Pre-Semester Orientation Programs

Institutionally, the purposes of first-year orientation programs may vary, but research has concluded students who do attend those programs gain direct benefits linked to their future at that respective university. Orientation programs, which can range from a few days to a full week, are intentional programs meant to help transition a student into his or her first year of college. Research shows that “65.2% of all schools surveyed indicate they offer extended and on-going orientation programs” (Shupp, 2014, para. 1). New student orientation programs, as mentioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), are a common tradition implemented most university settings (Carey, 2006).

Although differing types of orientation programs exist across university settings, according to Upcraft, Mullendore, Barefoot, and Fidler (1993), all university orientation programs should similarly benefit first-year students once the students complete the orientation program. Types of orientation programs include “one to three-day summer programs,” “week-long fall programs,” orientation classes, mid-way orientations, and “summer bridge programs” (p. 44–45). One distinct purpose for orientation is “familiarizing incoming students to college life” (Perrine & Spain, 2008, p. 155).

Although orientation programs vary institutionally, they are “almost ubiquitous in higher

education institutions, and evolved and diversified in structure and form” (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013, p. 43). First-year orientation programs are ever-present in higher education settings, and, although they may change and be revised over time, they remain significant. First-year orientation programs at large- and small-scale universities should serve similar purposes for their entering first-year students: to help familiarize each first-year student to the campus and community as well as to “[p]rovide students with attitudes, knowledge, skills and opportunities that will assist them in making a smooth transition to university or college community thereby allowing them to become engaged and productive community members” (Hernandez & Malner, 2010, p. 1).

Research has concluded the main benefits of a first-year orientation program for a university’s incoming first-year students include the following: (a) how orientation programs help first-year students become better adjusted to college, (b) the overall increase in faculty interaction because of an orientation program, (c) the effect that an orientation program has on individual retention rates at a university, and (d) a greater understanding of college, peers, and self through various orientation programs.

Transition and Adjustment to the University as a Whole

According to Ozaki (1994), the purpose of a first-year orientation program is to allow “freshmen [to] have opportunities to learn about the college environment” (p. 15), which aligns with other researchers’ definitions of and purposes for orientation. Another definition of orientation, presented by Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfle (1986), is “to acquaint students with the administrative regulations and expected behaviors of the institution, [and to] introduce them to student organizations and activities” (p. 156), which helps a first-year student transition to a university setting. Each goal within this

orientation definition focuses on helping to develop students within the transition period prior to the academic year beginning. Such efforts allow first-year students to become better adjusted to their new social and academic life.

One specific biology-focused orientation program at Louisiana State University states their goal is to give “students a realistic look at the pace of college life” (Wischusen, Wischusen, & Pomarico, 2011, p. 434). Using a first-year orientation program to normalize the “pace of college life” can carry over into any first-year orientation program at an institution. Because students are fully entering into a new atmosphere, the hope of the institution is that “the orientation process contributes to the social, intellectual, and emotional growth of the student and continues to be an integral part of higher education” (Ozaki, 1994, p. 2).

Another important conclusion from a study conducted at Eastern Kentucky University was the overall benefit their first-year students gained from the “New Student Days” orientation program. The overall impact was in transition—both academically and socially—for each incoming first-year student (Perrine & Spain, 2008). Institutions should utilize the period of orientation so that students get the most out of their pre-semester experience while they transition into a new environment. As referenced by Miller et al. (2002), Mullendore’s research (1992) showed that one distinct purpose or gain for first-year students who choose to attend a first-year orientation program is that orientation “allow[s] students to be impacted immediately in their association with an institution” (p. 51). This adjustment period for first-year students can prove less dramatic due to the orientation program their institutions provide for them. A first-year orientation

program provides intentional space for first-year students to understand their university better as well as become familiar with the expectations of college.

Increased Interaction with Faculty

Research demonstrates that “faculty members, as noted earlier, have been shown to play important roles (both inside and outside the classroom) in what and how much students learn on a broad front” (Terenzini et al., 1994, p. 71). Terenzini et al. further stated, “It is important that new students make contact with faculty members as early as possible in their college careers,” with orientation as one of those outlets (p. 71). Having faculty accessible and active during a first-year orientation program helps to create an interactive and welcoming space for first-year students. First-year students who attend orientation prior to their fall semester have more developed relationships with faculty and staff due to the increased opportunity for interaction during the orientation program. Upcraft et al. (1993) commented, “Orientation programs provide opportunities for entering students to develop realistic academic and personal goals, to locate student support services and resources, to meet faculty and/or peer mentors” (p. 37).

The overall relationship students have with faculty depends highly on the interaction one has with the other. Greenfield et al. (2013) stated,

It is critical that during orientation, a student begins to envision himself or herself within the social fabric of the institution and start to spin the strands of connection that will ultimately result in a strong web of support during college. (p. 44)

They then help define how a web of support is created through faculty interacting and becoming involved. Further, “The inclusion of faculty and other academic support staff and a focus on the intellectual community of the campus and classroom are valuable

components of the orientation experience” (p. 44). First-year students who interact with faculty members during orientation and participate in activities that involve faculty and staff are “more likely to interact with faculty outside of class” (Gardner, 2015, p. 19).

When addressing first-year seminar type courses, Ozaki (1994) concluded, “During the classes, the students were given many opportunities to interact with the student personnel staff who were responsible for teaching the topics” (p. 3). First-year seminar courses can be and often are incorporated into a first-year orientation program, which can increase student-faculty interaction. The level of faculty interaction at various universities differs based on the size of an institution and the option of a first-year seminar course offered. Faculty and staff historically take part in orientation activities, programming opportunities, and first-year seminar courses throughout the year. With regard to first-year seminar courses, Barefoot (2000) stated, “In the fall of 1999, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill began a series of first-year seminars taught entirely by tenured faculty” as a “first-year initiative[s] to improve the overall level of student intellectualism” (p. 14). Faculty teaching first-year seminar courses or participating in first-year orientation initiatives critically allows first-year students to become familiar with faculty.

In Astin’s (1993) research on how students are affected by their college experiences, he concluded faculty are one environmental variable in a student’s college experience. Astin stated that, in regard to “the undergraduate student’s college experience,” college campuses where faculty are highly involved have positive lasting effects on students overall (p. 32). One area within higher education in which faculty can positively impact a college student’s environment is the first-year seminar setting, taught

by faculty or staff partners. Another is general participation from faculty and staff during orientation activities. Intentional participation by faculty and staff is thus critical for a student's relationship with them to develop during these orientation activities.

Interactions vary at different institutions, based on size and number of faculty. For example, Eastern Kentucky University has a student body of roughly 14,000 undergraduate students. One of their goals is to create opportunities for connections to take place among their students and the faculty/staff and to offer programming "designed to encourage social interaction among students and faculty/staff" (Perrine & Spain, 2008, p. 158). Even greater opportunities exist for small liberal-arts institutions to allow for and create occasions for interaction between students and faculty to occur.

Terenzini and Pascarella (1978) concluded that "particular attention needs to be given to the nature of informal student-faculty contact and its influence in facilitating the academic and social integration of students" (p. 365). This "informal contact" includes faculty and staff taking full advantage of the allotted time and space with the first-year students for introductions and conversation. Rice and Thomas (1989) agreed with the importance of student-faculty interaction, stating, "Students participating in the full array of orientation-related programming were significantly more involved with faculty..." (p. 16). Overall, interaction with faculty, administrators, and staff in a non-formal setting is beneficial and encouraged, especially for first-year students during orientation.

Retention, Connectedness, and Orientation

Research has shown the relationship and responsibility the university has with first-year students engaged in their first-year orientation program and the existence of "student success and retention" (Evenbeck & Hamilton, 2006, p. 18). Unfortunately, it

does not necessarily carry over into the institution as a whole. According to Reason (2009), “Student retention has been the primary goal for higher education institutions for several decades,” and, although “studies fail to consider the wide variety of influences that shape student persistence,” one possible way higher education institutions can address this retention issue is through an effective first-year orientation program (p. 659).

University retention rates are an overall concern, especially after a student’s first college year. Colleges must ensure orientation programs are intentionally designed to keep retention rates high for first-year students. Mullendore and Banahan (2005) noted,

Orientation is the college’s best opportunity to introduce a strong learning environment, build the foundations for academic success, welcome students and families to the campus community, promote student interactions with faculty and staff, and convey the values and traditions of their new institution. (p. 391)

The first year of college thus often determines the future success and retention for students on college campuses.

One of the more influential purposes and hopes of a first-year orientation program, according to Miller et al. (2002), is to build retention. Jacobs (2010) stated, “Orientation staff must make the case that orientation is a priority event for the campus, while setting realistic expectations about its contributions to student engagement and retention” (p. 29). As a result, retention and engagement relies heavily on commitment from an institution’s staff, faculty, and administrators because, “while most administrators understand that there is a need for new student orientation, at times there is a lack of understanding about its full range of contributions and important to the campus community” (p. 29). Gardner’s (2015) independent study, focused on “First-Year

Experience,” found first-year students “reported higher levels of satisfaction with overall orientation to college” and thus higher retention rates due to their orientation experience (p. 19). Tinto’s (1975) theory noted a fluid connection between a student dropping out of college and an evident lack of “connectedness to an institution,” which “influence[s] college persistence,” or retention (as cited in Perrine & Spain, 2008, p. 156).

As a main benefit, attending orientation does affect a first-year student’s overall acclimation to college. Although overall retention is not necessarily better for a university as a whole, as concluded in Perrine and Spain (2008), Tinto (1975) linked orientation to a student’s feeling of acclimation and connectedness to a university. For students who enjoyed orientation, it was beneficial; for individuals who did not find it beneficial, retention lacked. Something to consider when addressing orientation and overall retention is the size of the university. Perrine and Spain (2008) conducted their study at Eastern Kentucky University, which gives one set of results based on an approximate campus population of 14,000 undergraduate students; thus, a larger university may have varying results when considering retention rates. Nonetheless, Cuseo (n.d.) proved retention as one outcome “associated with the first-year seminar,” which is part of a broader first-year orientation program (para. 3). Additionally, Perrine and Spain (2008) claimed, “Optional orientation programs may have more impact on retention than the present, and other, studies suggest” (p. 167), denoting the importance of first-year orientation programs.

Overall, Mullendore and Banahan (2005) believed that, “to accomplish orientation goals and to have a positive impact on retention, it is imperative that orientation be considered a comprehensive process rather than a single event” (p. 394). Stressing the

possible long-term impacts of an orientation program on first-year students by creating opportunities throughout the orientation period can help create a more successful retention rate for the university as a whole. Other factors that can influence the retention of first-year students include family members and others' perceptions of the program, those employed by the institution, or the student themselves (Perrine & Spain, 2008).

Orienting the Family to College

The family of a first-year student is just as important to orient as the student entering college. According to Mullendore and Banahan (2005), orientation is a unique opportunity to help establish a student's success in a college as well as address any concerns the family may have for their student. Orienting a student's family by addressing main topics such as "freedom and responsibility (developing self-discipline, managing time and money, overcoming homesickness, and so on)" aid in the transition for a first-year student's family (p. 400). The impression the university leaves on the first-year student also carries into the views his or her family has about the institution.

Greater Understanding of Peers and Self

According to Miller et al. (2002), the following goals of student affairs professionals can be implemented into an orientation program: "foster academic skills, provide opportunities for peer-interaction, encourage student maturation and development, and among other things, provide a cultural awareness and broadening world view" (p. 51). Mullendore and Banahan (2005) viewed orientation as "a time in which basic habits are formed that influence students' academic success and personal growth," with a key emphasis on personal growth (p. 391). One area of personal growth can occur by developing relationships and friendships throughout a college experience,

starting with orientation. Jacobs (2010) defined growth through interaction with others, mainly focusing on community building by stating, “Orientation programs typically include in their mission (often institutionally mandated) a responsibility to develop a sense of community” (pp. 32–33). As a result, two main types of growth can occur through students’ attendance at orientation programs: greater peer-to-peer interaction and, in turn, growth through community, as well as growth in one’s self.

Peer-to-peer interaction. Growth occurs during orientation in a number of ways, including through small- and large-group peer interaction. Terenzini et al. (1994) stated, “Through orientation, new students receive their first introduction to the attitudinal and behavioral norms of a new academic and social setting and to what will be expected of them in that community” (p. 71). A student’s experience with an orientation program highly affects their transition. One effective programming opportunity in an orientation program is to split students into smaller groups. Wischusen et al. (2011) found students benefited when “divided into small groups during the program based on their fall courses” (p. 438). These smaller groups also “provide an instant connection to other students” (p. 438). This style of learning is effective for first-year students who are adjusting to the college environment and feel intimidated when integrating with peers.

Another vital goal of any first-year orientation program is to promote the significance of an orientation program so there is a better “understanding about its full range of contributions and importance to the campus community” (Jacobs, 2010, p. 29). When students can participate in shared activities with their peers, an increased sense of community and peer interaction emerges as trust develops within the student body. The feeling of “community” continues after orientation and throughout a student’s first year

because “orientation programs [assist] in fostering a sense of connectedness to the university” (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005, p. 6). Spady (1971) concluded “social integration, satisfaction, and institutional commitment” play a large role in the overall development of “interpersonal relationships and intellectual development” during a student’s undergraduate years (p. 38). Allowing students to develop and grow with their new college community during orientation is critical to freshmen’s adjustment stage.

Growth in self. Rice and Thomas (1989) studied various types of orientation programming and found a few of the most positive and beneficial outcomes for a first-year student who attended a summer orientation: first-year students were “more likely to feel that college personnel helped them with a problem”; were “more certain about college”; and were “more likely to believe that instructor[s] explained things in ways that student[s] could understand” (p.7). For students who attend a first-year orientation program, one outcome other than an increase in peer-to-peer interaction is self-growth.

One common goal students gain from an orientation experience is this theme of a “shared experience” with other students, and this can occur in a variety of ways. One way the AACU suggests to connect students through this shared experience prior to their arrival on campus is through a “common reading” assigned over the summer (Ferguson, 2006). Another way to create this shared experience for first-year students is through an online discussion board on which students can discuss the summer reading. The shared experiences that orientation programs offer have the unique opportunity to “communicate valuable messages to new students” through the use of many diverse avenues (p. 9).

The need for support. Development of one’s self during a period in college must begin early in the collegiate experience. A student’s self-concept plays an important role

in his or her development during the first year of college, more specifically during orientation. Dresel and Grassinger (2013) described the various challenges of transition and adverse change for first-year students in college, stating, “There is a need for action to support undergraduates at the start of their university studies” (p. 159). Making sure university faculty, staff, and orientation leaders realize the power of this finding can help them recognize that first-year students indeed go through different periods of transition and need support. Receiving support from people in the same environment not only assists in the development of self but increases the likelihood of a positive self-construct. Boulter (2002) explained the concept of adjustment and self-growth: “Successful adjustment to college during the first year is an area of increasing concern for most institutions of higher education” (para. 2; McGrath & Braunstein, 1997; Tinto, 1993). Successful adjustment to the college atmosphere—which can include the orientation period—is essential for a first-year student to succeed.

A first-year student preliminary impression of college is often through his or her orientation experience. As Boulter (2002) explained, the first year of college is an area of transition and adjustment. Ozaki (1994) also noted the significance of an orientation program: “The major purpose of orientation is to provide students with knowledge about college life and the various activities which would ease the adjustment to the college environment and thereby increase the students’ chances for success” (p. 2). Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis uses their orientation period as a time of transition for their first-year students; moreover, the purpose “is for students to realize right from the start—even as early as in orientation—that they are engaged in a coherent program intentionally designed and optimally scaffolded for their needs, not a jumble of

courses and requirements” (Evenbeck & Hamilton, 2006, p. 18). Beginning each student’s first year with a program that requires critical thinking, as well as a program intentionally developed to challenge students, helps the overall development of a first-year student’s self confidence, critical thinking skills, and “successful integration into a new and unfamiliar academic and social setting” (Pascarella et al., 1986, p. 156).

Conclusion

A first-year orientation program offers first-year students significant benefits. However, room for improvement exists. Students are transitioning and adjusting to a new stage in life, and the university must “keep in mind that students enter college at varying levels of social preparedness” (Upcraft, et al., 1993, p. 32). Ensuring each student’s time during orientation is utilized well is essential, as a “students’ feelings of connectedness to an institution should influence college persistence,” and individual retention and success for universities are crucial (Tinto, 1975, as cited in Perrine & Spain, 2008, p. 156). As reported by the study conducted at Eastern Kentucky University, “Most parts of the NSD [New Student Days] program were perceived by students to be helpful to their college academic or social adjustment” (Perrine & Spain, 2008, p. 165). This goal of first-year orientation programs—to help with social and academic adjustment and overall transition and to welcome first-year students to a college campus—should be the aim for all higher education institutions.

Allowing adequate time for first-year students to interact with faculty and staff during orientation activities is also a critical piece of a first-year student’s development. Studies by Terenzini et al. (1994) revealed that, overall, faculty did influence first-year students’ lives, but what varied was *how* they influenced them. Furthermore, providing a

first-year orientation program that allots time for students to interact with peers, provides activities that deepen relationships, and has opportunities for growth in one's sense of self is fundamental and the core purpose of each orientation program. Jacobs (2010) stated, "The value of orientation is manifested in a variety of ways, and none more powerful than the effect it can have on student persistence and graduation" (p. 37). The positive benefits and satisfaction levels of an orientation program indicate the importance of universities developing and delivering such programs.

Overall, a first-year orientation program supplies a plethora of benefits to first-year students. According to Greenfield et al. (2013), "Articulation and actualization of the goals of orientation must ultimately fit the specific mission and culture of an institution" (p. 51). University campuses vary in terms of their culture. Regardless, first-year orientation programs can help every first-year student begin his or her academic year successfully. Orientation is a period of time when the institution has the chance to specifically reach out to the incoming freshman class of students and deliver beneficial results. By incorporating faculty, administrators, and the student body into the orientation program, all can serve as vessels to help provide new opportunities to an incoming class of first-year students.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to explore and understand the benefits of an orientation program for first-year students and to understand if first-year students were satisfied after participating in their respective first-year orientation program. The study used a qualitative phenomenological design. According to Creswell (2012), in a phenomenological qualitative study, the researcher seeks “to explore and understand one single phenomenon” (p. 130). Therefore, this methodology was selected because the research examined the “single phenomenon” of orientation, while taking into consideration the “multiple external forces that shape this phenomenon” (p. 130).

Context, Background, and Participants

The present research was conducted at a small, private, liberal-arts institution located in the Midwest with an enrollment of 2,800 full-time undergraduate students. This student population is well represented from various ethnicities, multiple states throughout the United States, and a wide variety of countries around the world.

The participants who took part in the study were enrolled in the second semester of their first college year. Transfer students were not interviewed because they did not go through the same first-year orientation program experience as the first-year students prior to beginning the fall semester. Participants interviewed for the research were at least 18 years old. The researcher chose to begin interviews eight months after students

participated in first-year orientation in order to allow adequate time for each participant to process his or her experience.

Between 8 and 12 participants were chosen before the researcher arrived at the institution. The Director of First-Year Experience and Students in Transition emailed the first-year staff partners and asked for suggestions of students whom they thought might be interested in being interviewed for the research. This purposeful sampling of students was completely voluntary and thus based upon whether the student chose to participate. The students who inquired about a possible interview were contacted based on their interest in the topic, participation in the orientation program, and involvement at the institution. Of the students who participated in the research, there were more female participants (6) than male (2), as well as little diversity of race, ethnicity and gender, which unfortunately do not reflect the institutional demographics.

This process of choosing participants is called convenience sampling. More specifically, “In convenience sampling the researcher selects participants because they are willing and available to be studied” (Creswell, 2012, p. 145). The chosen participants were the best selection of students because they could articulate and represent the experience they had during orientation.

Before the research was conducted, participants gave their consent to participate in the study through two written consent forms: one for the researcher’s home institution and one for the institution where the researcher interviewed (see Appendix A). Participants were informed the interviews were one-on-one and face-to-face before they entered the actual interview. The participants did not know the questions prior to the interview.

Each of these first-year students was interviewed about his or her experience in the completed orientation program. This program, entitled “Big Questions,” is a pre-semester orientation program the institution encourages all first-year students to attend. Though highly encouraged, the school promotes the orientation program as non-mandatory. This program is highly interactive and engaging for all first-year students.

Procedures

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals took place at both the researcher’s institution and at the institution where the researcher interviewed before the study was conducted. According to Cornell University (2014), IRB approval is meant “to review all research that directly or indirectly involves human participants” before the interviews to ensure the research questions do not harm participants (para. 1). Prior to the researcher arriving, the director of First-Year Experience and Students in Transition planned a time and location for the face-to-face interviews to take place. Once the interview date was finalized, the director arranged interviews with the participants. The interviews were analyzed for overall saturation; that is, the researcher was most concerned about quality and saturation of interviews over a specific time limit on the interviews themselves. The interview protocol (see Appendix B) included a series of 10 questions asked of each participant. The 10 semi-structured questions allowed for further explanation or questioning. This process allowed the participants to expand on comments they made from the interview with the researcher.

Analysis

After the interviews took place, the researcher began the transcribing and coding processes. The first step included a preliminary exploratory analysis, which Creswell

(2012) defined as “exploring the data to obtain a general sense of the data, memoing ideas, thinking about the organization of the data, and considering whether you need more data” (p. 243). After completing this step, the researcher then coded the data by hand. Coding included identifying common themes from the interviews. In addition, the interviewer examined the interviews themselves and compared and contrasted the responses within the interviews, looking “for overlap and redundancy” (p. 243). The researcher used axial coding as well. With axial coding, the researcher “select[ed] one open coding category, position[ed] it at the center of the process being explored (as the core phenomenon), and then relate[d] other categories to it” (p. 426). This axial coding method was chosen to help create main themes and then sub-themes based on frequency.

Anticipated benefits of the research included reporting the purposes and benefits of a student who attended a first-year orientation program as well as analyzing the results to improve future higher education orientation programs. The research also benefits higher education professionals by allowing them to examine their own orientation programs and use the responses from the interviews to assess them. Overall, this research supports individuals those working in higher education by analyzing what needs to be improved so student affairs professionals can act on promoting the benefits and the level of satisfaction a first-year orientation program has to offer. The following chapters present and discuss the findings of the present study.

Chapter 4

Results

The following questions guided this research: (a) What are the main benefits for first-year students attending an orientation program prior to the school year beginning, and (b) How satisfied are first-year students once they have completed their institutions orientation program?

Three main themes emerged from the eight interviews. Among these themes emerged a total of 11 sub-themes. The themes were determined by either the frequency of the themes mentioned in the interviews and the overall significance from a majority of the interviewees' experiences. The main emergent themes included the following:

1. Overall formation of relationships
2. Trust developed in one's self and with others
3. Ease and adjustment into the first year of college as a whole.

Relationships Formed

One of the major themes that emerged from the eight interviews was the forming of deep relationships through the university's orientation program. Deep relationships are defined in various ways. The four sub-groups that emerged beneath the major theme of "relationships forming" were relationships with (a) peers, (b) faculty, (c) the incoming freshmen class as a whole (commuters and on-campus residents), and (d) First-Year seminar (FYS) groups, specifically in a small group setting. This main theme of

relationships was described well by Jason: “I already knew a bunch of people like from Freshman Orientation, so it didn’t feel like it was just a sea of strangers.”

Peer-to-peer. All eight participants mentioned the impact orientation had on peer development and how orientation allowed time and space for peer friendships to develop. Overall, the participants mentioned the theme of developing friendships a total of 51 times. For example, Daisy discussed how she had planned to stay at the university for only two years because she was enrolled in a dual-acceptance pharmacy program. However, after attending orientation, she shared this thought:

I made a lot of great friends that I don’t want to leave after two years . . . throughout those four days even though it was just four days, I got to know all of the students really well in my FYS group, and I met a lot of other students too but because I was with my FYS group so often, and we ended up hanging out a lot, I actually met my two best friends from that group and so now we do everything with each other.

The first-year orientation program impacted Daisy in numerous ways, including how she was influenced by her first-year seminar small group and the freshmen group activities.

Jason also discussed peer-to-peer relationships forming through orientation: “It really helped me meet new people so in my FYS class. . . . I’m still really good friends with the guys there, like after class we would still hang out, play card games afterwards . . . we’d explore the school.” According to the participants, the opportunity orientation provided for first-year students to interact and develop friendships with one another was the most beneficial aspect of orientation.

Faculty. Of the eight participants, six noted the positive impact orientation had on their relationships with faculty and staff members from the university. Relationships with faculty were of high importance for the students interviewed because they felt confident knowing their faculty before beginning the academic year. Annie stated one of the main reasons she chose to go to a small college was because she “wanted it to be like [she] could communicate with [her] professors.” She later shared another faculty-related benefit she noticed after attending orientation before school began:

I think the faculty one was a big one because we had our first FYS class actually during orientation kind of, we met with the professor and our staff partner and actually our staff partner was with us throughout orientation so it helped us better connect with her, and . . . made us not nervous to go to our first college class.

Similarly, LeAnne described how building relationships with faculty members in her first-year seminar course contributed to how comfortable she felt starting the school year:

It definitely made me aware of places that can help or just feeling comfortable with the professors, I definitely feel like my professors want to help me and I’m very comfortable going to talk to them, which I hadn’t been in high school, so, I’m definitely building that relationship before school even like really started.

Overall, this theme of faculty interaction prior to beginning the school year was apparent and beneficial for students to feel more acclimated to the University.

Freshmen class. All eight participants also mentioned forming relationships through interaction with the freshmen class. Orientation participants included both students who commuted and those who lived on campus. This theme was named a total of 45 times across all 8 interviews. In particular, the interviewees stressed the positive

impact the larger group activities and conversations had on them throughout orientation. For example, Julie stated the benefits of meeting other first-year students because of the smaller campus size: "I feel like the combination of having you know various activities with different orientation groups was very helpful to meet new people and just get to know more people from campus, just because it's so small."

This theme of the broader freshmen community also appeared in another participant's response. When asked about which program(s) she enjoyed the most, LeAnne described one program all first-year students participated in that she believed helped to develop cohesive trust:

We were in . . . a group setting and we were able to talk about things or discuss like, a pretty personal thing but instead . . . like instead of feeling uncomfortable it was, very like easing into it, I remember specifically at our . . . we were all in the chapel as an entire group and you'd have to stand for specific things, like if you've experienced those and they start simple and then they go to more in depth, like life things that would maybe cause some anxiety to talk about or think about, but it was really impactful to see how many people would stand up for things.

All eight interviewed students recognized the opportunities orientation provided for large group interaction as beneficial in creating opportunities for relationships to form.

Small group setting. Every participant stated the importance and benefit of quality time in a small-group setting, better known as the first-year seminar (FYS) groups. These FYS groups are based on the FYS course in which each first-year student chooses to enroll. This smaller setting felt safe for many interview participants, and this benefit of quality time with their FYS group was seen throughout all eight interviews.

Naomi shared that, by the last day of orientation, “You have kind of found a comfort zone within your FYS group and with your leader.” Nicole expressed a different perspective on the same theme of small group interactions:

I love all of Big Questions the only thing I didn’t super-duper love was the fact that we were always with the same group . . . so we were always with the same 20 people and I got to know them very well and I know that that was the point, but I would have liked to inter-mix with other groups too.

The small-group seminar setting was an intentional part of the University’s orientation program. Although Nicole found the FYS group gathering too repetitive, she still admitted to the benefits of the small-group setting, which resulted in relationship building. Julie also shared the impact her FYS group had on her orientation experience:

I got to know other people so I felt more comfortable around others . . . I was able to have you know the that small group of however many were in that group, I think it was 15 or so . . . I had that group to you know rely on whether it be roommate problems, or class struggles, I always knew I had someone to go to.

This theme of building intentional relationships through a small group setting, like the one provided in this orientation program, was evident in each of the interviewed participants’ first-year orientation experiences.

Trust Developed for the Year to Come

Another major theme that emerged from the interviews was the theme of developed trust for the year to come. Trust emerged through a variety of activities, such as through a group exercise. Nicole shared about her experience and the need for trust:

The wall was good, just because we didn't, we had people in our group that were all different shapes, different sizes, different heights, everything . . . and to try and figure out how we were gonna get everyone above that wall was a little intimidating but we did it, so that was exciting.

Four frequently mentioned sub-themes contributed to this developed trust in the first-year students: (a) the influence of orientation student leaders (OSL); (b) the impact of the programming (including on/off campus events and service work); (c) an overall easing of anxieties and nervousness, along with a boost in self-confidence; and (d) the emphasis placed on inclusivity and diversity of the university.

Orientation student leaders. Of the eight participants, six mentioned the impact their OSL had on their orientation experience. Teddy expressed the role and impact his OSL had in bringing their FYS group together. In particular, he stated, "They . . . make you like, if some people are . . . shy or introverted they get you to . . . talk to people and get involved . . . meet new friends potentially."

Similarly, Jason felt the role played by his OSL welcomed him into his freshman year. In response to the question, "What made you feel most welcomed?" Jason shared:

The OSL's, they're really great . . . I thought, you know, these are just regular people, like students who the school employs and they do this for one week and then they . . . and even after the events, in between like during breaks, the OSL's would play Frisbee with us . . . they would hang out with us . . . tell us like funny stuff about school . . . I didn't feel forced at all.

Annie agreed that the role of the OSL also made her feel most welcomed on the university's campus:

That made me feel most welcomed . . . I liked that the OSL's, the Orientation Student Leaders they're really helpful and help mending our FYS group together, and doing the small activities with those specific people helped us become a part of that class together . . . part of a community.

The six students who mentioned their OSL stressed the impact of this figure on their first-year orientation experience through relationship building and connection.

Programming and events. Seven of participants interviewed discussed how intentional programming and orientation events helped to build trust among their group and confidence within themselves. One of the most common events described in the interviews was a motivational speaker who came to the university on the last day of orientation. Naomi stated:

I really enjoyed, we had a speaker come in . . . and he spoke and we had to stand up for different things it was one of the last days I think it was the last activity actually . . . and it was kind of 'what do you stand for', like what do you identify by, what makes you "you", and for me it was really eye opening and I really enjoyed that experience and it was very, the environment that was set up was a very welcoming and it was on the last day so we kind of knew people and it was more comforting, so it, you were able to be open and express yourself that way.

This program helped to create a comfortable, welcoming space in which students could feel safe. Teddy shared how all the orientation programs were beneficial. In particular, he noted, "Everything had a purpose . . . and you had to figure out what that purpose was . . . in some ways." He pointed out how each event and program did, in fact, serve a purpose, but the student has choice whether or not to embrace that purpose.

Eased anxieties/nervousness and self confidence boost. All eight participants mentioned an aspect of how orientation helped ease their nerves and boost their self-confidence going into their freshman year of college. An example of how orientation helped lessen nerves revealed itself in Jason's interview when he shared his personal story of attending the Western line-dancing night, one of the orientation program options:

I never really danced before . . . and now I dance a lot. I danced three times with the University's team the hip-hop team . . . I remember doing another dance for like hip-hop showcase next week for a fraternity and I might take a dance class next semester.

The natural social setting orientation provides for first-year students is revealed in many ways, such as through a trust activity students did with their FYS groups. When asked about which program she enjoyed the most, Julie shared:

Here were so many and I enjoyed all of them and then the . . . I think the one that really stuck out was the wall activity which was . . . part of one of the orientation group activities on and then we had to you know use team work and then trust just to get over the wall.

For LeAnne, orientation helped her feel more self-confident through various avenues:

I think definitely my group of friends, they really eased me into college, I was probably shy at the beginning of the year and now I'm like way more outgoing and have better chance of wanting to meet new people . . . like without them even so I think just giving me, giving me the initial confidence to do that was great.

Orientation provided a space for LeAnne to feel more confident and comfortable with herself, which contributed to the theme of trust and confidence in self and others.

Overall, orientation gave all eight students the opportunity to gain confidence in themselves, as well as trust in others, prior to beginning their first year of college.

Inclusivity and diversity. All eight participants described how orientation helped them to appreciate the university as an inclusive campus. Because of orientation, all eight participants began their first year of college feeling included, accepted, and respected on campus. Certain aspects within orientation allowed for this feeling of diversity and inclusivity. For example, Jason shared, “I feel like I could really expand meeting new people, like new perspectives.” Similarly, Teddy shared his experience after an event that took place in the chapel: “I’m pretty sure everyone else realized that everyone here is . . . different, had come from different background but we’re all here for the same reason . . . to get an education.”

Annie shared how her OSL helped to create that safe and inclusive space by fostering an environment that welcomed ELSA (University Learning and Success Academy) students—students with special needs or learning disabilities—into their small FYS group. She then gave another example of inclusivity:

There was one event I forget the speaker’s name, but we, like all of the orientate-, everyone, the whole orientation program we were in the chapel and he talked about what makes you “you” and we stood up if you were . . . a female, if you identified as gender fluid, if you, like he kind of clumped it into groups but in a way that didn’t make you feel uncomfortable standing up, so that was also a thing that welcomed us to the college and showed that it’s not a . . . community that’s gonna penalize you for being different.

When asked which event made her feel most welcomed, Julie passionately summed up her experience: “This campus is just so open to different religions, different points of view, different perspectives, I just think that was a great opportunity and something that everyone should look forward to just because they were so welcoming.” Overall, the feeling of inclusivity helped to create a trusting environment for these first-year students.

Overall Ease and Adjustment into the First Year of College

The last theme that emerged from the interviews was an overall ease and adjustment to the college environment through the university orientation program. Three factors contributed to this theme of overall adjustment into the University: (a) an overall ease of transition into college, (b) a deeper understanding of expectations in college, and (c) opportunities for ways freshmen can get involved in college.

Overall ease of transition into college. Mentioned 23 times and in all 3 interviews was how orientation helped ease the participants into the college transition. The participants noted how orientation provided opportunities not to feel as overwhelmed and stressed when classes and daily responsibilities began. Annie offered, “It was definitely not as intimidating coming in and being like oh I gotta go to a class that I’ve never been to before and a school I’ve never been to before.” Similarly, Naomi shared how orientation helped with transition into the school year:

You know your way around campus, you knew some people that you would say hi to in passing and stuff like that . . . and you kind of had an idea of what campus was like, so I think that helped a lot . . . as a transition.

Naomi then shared how orientation allowed her to get to know the physical campus well before beginning the school year. Julie shared how important the length of orientation

was to her and how crucial orientation as a program is: “It’s just more beneficial to starting college and adjusting.”

Expectations. Five participants shared how attending orientation provided a deeper understanding of college expectations. For example, Daisy shared some of her expectations for orientation prior even to attending orientation: “I knew it was a way to get to know students, and . . . you know be accustomed to the campus before actually going in as a freshman student.”

Orientation at the university gave these five students a sense of comfort and adjustment. Naomi, in particular, expressed appreciation for how the orientation program helped to guide them as freshmen but did not baby them. She stated:

We weren’t . . . coddled or anything, you’re 18...17, 18, 19 years old, here’s what you need to do, you’re on your own, we’re here to help you this three days is kind of your cushion, but after that you really, you have to figure it out . . . so I really I like that the program kind of guided us but it didn’t baby us, so it gave us the sense of direction, it gave us somewhere to go if we needed help.

Students were given resources to use prior to the academic year, and the participants conveyed that expectations were given to them during that orientation time.

Involvement opportunities. Of the eight participants interviewed, six discussed how orientation helped them become aware of various ways to get involved on campus. This theme of involvement reoccurred a total of 10 times amongst those 6 students.

Teddy, for example, expressed his thankfulness to the orientation program as a whole for creating opportunities to get involved: “Just all of them together just included different parts of . . . getting involved on campus which I feel is . . . essential to getting

here and feeling comfortable.” Later on, Teddy shared that part of the reason he was interested in specific organizations on campus was due to the way his OSL modeled involvement. In particular, he noted, “And right after that whole week I knew I wanted to be an OSL, and so I just kept striving for that and then I ended up getting it.”

Similarly, Jason expressed the benefits of being made aware of various organizations on campus through programming during orientation: “I felt like here I could join anything I felt the freedom . . . they had the Taste of the University, and I remember being open to join anything . . . and everyone was so friendly.”

Annie shared how orientation provided her the benefit of knowing what co-curricular opportunities were available on campus, as well as the awareness of inclusivity within those organizations. For example, she noted:

I see the inclusivity of the whole environment here has really carried over because I’ve been able to join more like clubs and things like that, and not be afraid that I’m gonna stand out, or not be included in the clubs. I’m part of a service fraternity here and it’s really inclusive and their very welcoming to anyone.

Overall, this major benefit of orientation carried over into many arenas of college, such as how first-year students can become involved in their first year of college.

Conclusion

The following three main themes emerged from these interviews: 1) building relationships, 2) developing trust, and 3) easing into the first year of college. Each theme was revealed through various avenues and appeared in all eight interviews. Beyond these three major themes emerged the 11 sub-themes that correlated to each of the major themes. Together, all eight interviews helped to define how an orientation program

benefits students. These benefits were represented through the eight students mentioning the impact of unique programming opportunities on campus, opportunities for intentional community with peers and faculty interaction, and as the impact the orientation program had on their overall transition experience.

The essence of this research helps to define and clarify each first-year student's experience with the orientation program provided. The eight interviewed students shared this phenomenon, and their perspectives contribute to the holistic understanding of how orientation benefits first-year students. Overall, students benefited in a variety of ways, thus evidencing their satisfaction with their orientation experience.

Chapter 5

Discussion

As evidenced in previous literature and findings, many benefits exist for a first-year student who attends his or her orientation program. Whether these students feel more connected to an institution because of their orientation experience (Tinto, 1975) or feel more socially comfortable (Pascarella et al., 1986), first-year orientation programs provide various benefits to the students who complete the program. The following questions guided this research: (a) What are the main benefits for first-year students attending an orientation program prior to the school year beginning? and (b) How satisfied are first-year students once they have completed their institutions orientation program? Despite limitations in the present study, the research clearly demonstrates the numerous benefits that a first-year orientation program can offer to first-year students.

Review of Findings

While still allowing for unique perspectives, all eight interviewees revealed a common set of themes. Existing literature is thus supported by evidence and the conclusions drawn from this research. Singer's (2003) research on first-year orientation programs explains the importance of a college orientation program and states how a university's summer orientation program has the opportunity and privilege to "convey realistic expectations for college life" (p. 52). Results from this qualitative study, as presented in Chapter 4, closely resemble the expectations noted in Singer's study.

Whether orientation provided safe spaces for conversations and relationships to build, allowed trust to form among students or within a student's sense of self, created time and opportunity for students to acclimate themselves to the university, or encouraged specific time for transition to occur, the results from this research suggest pre-semester orientation programs convey realistic expectations for first-year students.

Miller et al. (2002) expressed how crucial an orientation program is for universities to implement into their summer curriculum by highlighting the following goals of orientation: "build retention, foster academic skills, provide opportunities for peer-interaction, encourage student maturation and development, and among other things, provide a cultural awareness and broadening world view" (p. 51). Comparing the results of this qualitative study to Miller et al.'s definition shows at least three similar goals met by the specific university at which the present study was conducted.

Overall, students were satisfied from their orientation program and the three major themes that surfaced in support of that program as a whole are: 1) better developed relationships, 2) trust in others and in self, and 3) adjustment and transition into college prior to the academic year beginning.

Research Limitations

Number of participants. One limitation from the research was the total number of participants. Although the participants volunteered through purposeful sampling, more data could have been collected by conducting additional interviews. The results from the eight participants led to in-depth insight into the orientation experience, but a larger participant pool would likely prove beneficial.

Institution type. Another limitation in the research is the type of institution where the research was conducted. The feedback from the students at this institution only provided one outlook based on this particular institution. The results were shaped by institutional type (small, private, liberal arts college), thus limiting the results overall.

Gender, race, and residency. Another limitation of this study involves the gender imbalance of the interviewees. Only two males participated in the research, and, though the gender imbalance reflected the institutional demographics, more male voices may have proven helpful in the overall analysis. Having six female participants and only two male participants may have offered more emphasis on the female perspective and thus impacted the data. Another participant limitation was the respective ethnic composition. Lastly, residency impacted the responses the participants gave. Of the eight students interviewed, six lived on campus while two considered themselves commuters. As a result, living on campus gave those six students more ease and opportunity in attending late-night programming because of the convenience and the on-campus setting where most of the programming took place.

Timing and bias. Another study limitation was the timing of the face-to-face qualitative interviews. The research was conducted eight months after the orientation period ended at the university, and this delay may have impacted the data. Students occasionally hesitated in remembering names of programs, activities, and details from orientation, which was most likely due to the passage of time.

Bias also proved to be a limitation in the research. The researcher conducted this research at her alma mater and did so because of the positive role orientation played in her college experience. The interviewed students also appeared to have a positive bias

toward their orientation experience. Interview responses showed students who wanted to be interviewed had a quality orientation experience and felt satisfied with their time or they may not have volunteered to be interviewed. This student bias can also affect the data by only showing the positive results of orientation, leaving little room for critique.

Implications for Future Research Practitioners

The research results and the chosen methodology can benefit future practitioners by shedding light on first-year students' satisfaction with specific aspects of orientation. Researching first-year orientation programs and their curriculum is expansive and needs further exploration. This research is significant in the field of higher education because of its relevance to all undergraduate students. All undergraduate, first-year students need their universities to provide orientation programs, and this research offers insights into the benefits of such programs. This study also provides feedback on what areas of orientation need further attention or adjustment. Researching what benefits students in orientation programming and what is less beneficial to them can help future researchers.

Based on these research findings, future studies can be conducted in a variety of ways. Future research should explore orientation programming at various institution types, such as research or comprehensive universities. Research universities focus with greater intensity on the capacity of their faculty to produce research. Comprehensive institutions share that focus while allowing for and “expecting a balance of teaching and research” (Dalbey, 1995, p. 15). Research at these two different types of institutions may lead to new findings due to varying approaches to first-year orientation programs. Also, future studies can explore how international students are affected by their transition experience. The research conducted in this study focused specifically on traditional first-

year students, but international students may have a different orientation experience. Understanding multiple perspectives is vital so that future practitioners grasp the similarities and differences between both groups' orientation experiences.

Lastly, a future study should explore an institution with which the researcher of that study is unfamiliar. Practitioners should consider the effects bias has on research when evaluating orientation at institutions. Thus, one recommendation is for research to be conducted at an institution that the researcher is not familiar with so bias is limited in relation to the research results.

This present study took place at a small, liberal arts institution but is still relevant for many higher education settings. Although the results and recommendations given may be more immediately relevant to a smaller campus, the research implications carry over to other orientation programs. Because the study was conducted with the eight students specific to the university's orientation curriculum, some implications may vary, but the overall purpose should not. According to Upcraft et al. (1993), all university orientation programs should similarly benefit first-year students once the students finish their orientation program, no matter the size, institution type, or faith/non-faith affiliation.

The results from the interviews and the exploration of past literature show the positive impact orientation has on students. First-year directors, in particular, and orientation programs, in general, provide students with programs that matter. Based on the interviews, students were satisfied with their orientation experience. Students who benefit from their orientation experience enter into their first year of college satisfied. Students recognized the need for an orientation program and the help the program provided. Recognizing the need for an orientation program is important for those

working or directing orientation programs because the recognition provides honest and real feedback about students' time spent in the program. Seeing students satisfied after attending the orientation program provides future practitioners with the knowledge of what components are more successful than others within an orientation program.

No matter the size or type of institution, the purpose of a first-year orientation program should remain true and consistent. A few ways orientation programs can help first-year students make the transition to college include creating a hospitable space for the incoming freshmen, allowing space and time for first-year students to know their community, helping students become familiar with the college lifestyle (Perrine & Spain, 2008), and ensuring programming is intentional and purposeful.

Conclusion

Overall, students were satisfied with their orientation experience, and research evidences many benefits for students who attend such a program. As Jacobs (2010) stated, "A strong orientation program includes components as diverse as course selections, parking and housing information, articulation of the keys to academic success, community building, and programs on responsible choices" (p. 37). Orientation benefits first-year students in more than one way, as seen through the review of the previous literature and the eight qualitative interviews conducted. Although research can present various purposes for a university's orientation program, the focus is on the success and satisfaction level of each new student. Allowing orientation simply to be "one more program" without any beneficial outcomes would be purposeless. Universities have a role and responsibility to help create an orientation program that best serves their incoming first-year students.

References

- Astin, A. (1993). *What matters in college: Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc..
- Barefoot, B. O. (2000). The first-year experience: Are we making it any better? *About Campus*, 4(6), 12–18. doi:10.1002/abc.46
- Boulter, L. T. (2002). Self-concept as a predictor of college freshman academic adjustment. *College Student Journal*, 36, 234–246.
- Brown, J. L. (2012). *Developing a freshman orientation survey to improve student retention within a college*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference for Eastern Educational Research Association, Hilton Head, SC.
- Carey, S. J. (2006). From the editor. *Peer Review*, 8(3), 3. Retrieved from <http://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/peerreview/PRSU06.pdf>
- Chavez, K. (2015). First-year seminars: Gateway to success at Carolina. Retrieved from <http://fys.unc.edu/first-year-seminars-gateway-to-success-at-carolina/>
- Cornell University. (2014). Institutional review board. Retrieved from <https://www.irb.cornell.edu/faq/#gq1>
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

- Cuseo, J. (n. d.). The empirical case for the positive impact of the first-year seminar research on student outcomes. Retrieved from <http://qep.lsua.edu/docs/default-source/JoeCuseo/joe-cuseo.pdf?sfvrsn=2>
- Dalbey, M. A. (1995). What is a comprehensive university, and do I want to work there? *The Association of Departments of English Bulletin*, 111, 14–16.
doi:10.1632/ade.111.14
- Dresel, M., & Grassinger, R. (2013). Changes in achievement motivation among university freshmen. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 1(2), 159–173.
doi:10.11114/jets.v1i2.147
- Evenbeck, S., & Hamilton, S. (2006). From “my course” to “our program”: Collective responsibility for first-year student success. *Peer Review*, 8(3), 17–19. Retrieved from <http://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/peerreview/PRSU06.pdf>
- Ferguson, M. (2006). Creating common ground: Common reading and the first year of college. *Peer Review*, 8(3), 8–10. Retrieved from <http://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/peerreview/PRSU06.pdf>
- Gardner, J. N. (2015, February 7). *An evening with John Gardner* [PowerPoint slides]. 34th Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience, Dallas, TX. Retrieved from <http://www.sc.edu/fye/events/presentation/annual/2015handoutsAn%20Evening%20with%20John%20Gardner.pdf>
- Greenfield, G. M., Keup J. R., & Gardner J. N. (2013). *Developing and sustaining successful first-year programs: A guide for practitioners*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Hernandez, C. L., & Malnar, M. (2010, February 14). *Orientation 101: The basics of orientation & and introduction to NODA* [PowerPoint slides]. 29th Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience, Denver, CO. Retrieved from <http://sc.edu/fye/events/presentation/annual/2010/download/E-14.pdf>
- Hunter, M. S. (2006). Successful transitions to college through first-year programs. *Peer Review*, 8(3), 4–7. Retrieved from <http://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/peerreview/PRSU06.pdf>
- Jacobs, B. C. (2010). Making the case for orientation: Is it worth it? In J. A. Ward-Roof (Ed.), *Designing successful transitions: A guide for orienting students to college* (Monograph No. 13, 3rd ed., pp. 29–39). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Krause, K. L., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnis, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies* (Research Report). Retrieved from https://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/37491/FYEReport05.pdf
- Kuh, G. D. (2007). What student engagement data tell us about college readiness. *Peer Review*, 9(1). Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/what-student-engagement-data-tell-us-about-college-readiness>
- Larmar, S., & Ingamells, A. (2010). Enhancing the first-year university experience: Linking university orientation and engagement strategies to student connectivity

and capability. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 5, 210–223. doi:10.2304/rcie.2010.5.2.210

McGrath, M. M., & Braunstein, A. (1997). The prediction of freshmen attrition: An examination of the importance of certain demographic. *College Student Journal*, 31, 396–408.

Miller, M. T., Dyer, B. G., & Nadler, D. P. (2002). New student satisfaction with an orientation program: Creating effective learning transitions. *The Journal of College Orientation and Transition*, 10(1), 51–57. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234675306_New_Student_Satisfaction_with_an_Orientation_Program_Creating_Effective_Learning_Transitions

Mullendore, R. H. (1992). Student based programming in orientation. In D. P. Nadler (Ed.), *Orientation director's manual* (pp. 43–52). Statesboro, GA: National Orientation Director's Association.

Mullendore, R. H., & Banahan, L. A. (2005). Designing orientation programs. In M. L. Upcraft, J. N. Gardner, B. O. Barefoot, & Associates (Eds.), *Challenging and supporting the first-year student: A handbook for improving the first year of college* (pp. 391–409). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Ozaki, R. H. (1994). *Freshman orientation: A comparison of a five-week versus ten-work sessions* (Research Report). Retrieved from Educational Resource Information Center: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED374868.pdf>

Pascarella, E. T., Terenzini, P. T., & Wolfe, L. M. (1986). Orientation to college and freshman year persistence/withdrawal decisions. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 57, 155–175. doi:10.2307/1981479

- Perrine, R. M., & Spain, J. W. (2008). Impact of a pre-freshman college orientation program: Hidden benefits? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, and Practice*, *10*, 155–169. doi:10.2190/CS.10.2.c
- Reason, R. D. (2009). An examination of persistence research through the lens of a comprehensive conceptual framework. *Journal of College Student Development*, *50*, 659–682. doi:10.1353/csd.0.0098
- Rice, R., & Thomas, W. (1989). *The effects of various types of orientation programing upon freshman academic performances and reaction to college* (Research Report). Retrieved from Educational Resource Information Center: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED323443.pdf>
- Shupp, M. R. (2014). *Rethinking new student orientation*. Retrieved from [http://www.wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2014.ptw.\(36\).pdf](http://www.wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2014.ptw.(36).pdf)
- Singer, W. (2003). The role of the campus visit and summer orientation program in the modification of student expectations about college. *The Journal of College Orientation and Transition*, *10*, 52–59.
- Spady, W. G. (1971). Dropouts from higher education: toward an empirical model. *Interchange*, *2*(3), 38–62. doi:10.1007/BF02282469
- Terenzini, P. T., & Pascarella, E. T. (1978). The relation of students' precollege characteristics and freshman year experience to voluntary attrition. *Research in Higher Education*, *9*, 347–366. doi:10.1007/BF00991406
- Terenzini, P. T., Rendon L. I., Upcraft, L. M., Millar, S. B., Allison, K. W., Gregg, P. L., & Jalomo, R. (1994). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research in Higher Education*, *35*(1), 57–73. doi:10.1007/BF02496662

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 45*, 89–125.

doi:10.3102/00346543045001089

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Upcraft, L. M., Mullendore, R. H., Barefoot, B. O., & Fidler, D. S. (Eds.). (1993).

Designing successful transitions: A guide for orienting students to college (Mon. 13). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience.

Wischusen, S. M., Wischusen, W. E., & Pomarico, S. M. (2011). Impact of a short pre-freshman program on retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, and Practice, 12*, 429–441. doi:10.2190/CS.12.4.c

Appendix A

Consent Forms

Home University

1. Project Title

The Benefits and Level of Satisfaction a First Year Orientation Program Delivers to Freshmen in College

2. Introduction of Researcher(s)

Katie Evensen is a graduate student earning her Masters of Higher Education Program studying at X University. Her assistantship is overseeing the Student Activities Council, within X University's Student Organizations. The students she oversees range from Freshmen to Seniors.

3. Purpose of Research

I am conducting a qualitative research study on the benefits that first-year students receive from attending X College's Orientation program, ".....". I would appreciate your participation in this study, as it will assist me and future researchers in making recommendations for improving orientation programs at higher education institutions.

4. Explanation of Procedures

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be completing a face-to-face interview that will take approximately 30-45 minutes. Each participant will be audio-recorded so that I can transcribe the interviews, code them, and then report on the research/results from the interviews. The study will run for one full day on April 8th, from 9:00AM until 4:00PM.

5. Risks and Benefits

I do not anticipate any foreseeable risks or discomforts other than the inconvenience to you in completing the interview. If there are any risks that do occur, then the counseling number will be handy for the students (*Counseling Services Center (Wellness Center) on X College's Campus - Phone Number: (000) 000-0000*). This study will benefit you by allowing you to process through your orientation experience and give feedback for how your orientation experience was (both benefits and improvements needed). It will also benefit me in my understanding of the importance of implementing a first-year orientation program during a student's first-year in college. This research will also allow

universities to examine their own orientation programs and use the feedback from my interviews to assess their own first-year orientation program.

6. Safeguards of Data

I will not identify you during my thesis defense or in my research paper in general. Your name will be changed to protect your true identity. Data will be published, but I will not use your real name in the final thesis/presentation when I defend. The data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

7. Freedom to withdraw from the study

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw from the study, the information gathered at that point will be destroyed and you will not be penalized at all.

8. Third Party Referral

Should you have any questions about this project at any time, feel free to contact Katie Evensen at 000-000-0000 or at katie_evensen@xuniversity.edu. X University's Address is 0 X Avenue, X, X, 00000

If you have any questions about your treatment as a participant in this study, please call or write to my supervisor:

*(Name), Thesis Supervisor, X University
000 W. X Avenue, City State, 00000*

Although Dr. ... will ask your name, all questions are kept in confidence.

9. If you have any questions regarding this research, your interview, your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject, it can be directed to X University's Institutional Review Board at IRB@xuniversity.edu or the Chair of the IRB, ... at 000-000-0000 or name@xuniversity.edu

INFORMED CONSENT

SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I attest to being 18 years of age or older and I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

Subject's Printed Name: _____

Subject's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ **Date:** _____

An e-mail is needed for the researcher if she needs to contact you to clarify or verify anything you stated during the interview to make sure she understood and heard and your comments correctly. There will be no “going through someone else” any further at this point for reasons of confidentiality and privacy. The researcher will be directly contacting you, as the participant if needed.

E-Mail: _____

University where Research was Conducted

1. Project Title

The Benefits and Level of Satisfaction a First Year Orientation Program Delivers to Freshmen in College

2. Introduction of Researcher(s)

Katie Evensen is a graduate student earning her Masters of Higher Education Program studying at X University. Her assistantship is overseeing the Student Activities Council, within X Student Organizations. The students she oversees range from Freshmen to Seniors.

3. Purpose of Research

I am conducting a qualitative research study on the benefits that first-year students receive from attending X College’s Orientation program, “.....”. I would appreciate your participation in this study, as it will assist me and future researchers in making recommendations for improving orientation programs at higher education institutions.

4. Explanation of Procedures

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be completing a face-to-face interview that will take approximately 30-45 minutes. Each participant will be audio-recorded so that I can transcribe the interviews, code them, and then report on the research/results from the interviews. The study will run for one full day on April 8th, from 9:00AM until 4:00PM.

5. Risks and Benefits

I do not anticipate any foreseeable risks or discomforts other than the inconvenience to you in completing the interview. If there are any risks that do occur, then the counseling number will be handy for the students (*Counseling Services Center (Wellness Center) on X College’s Campus - Phone Number: (000) 000-0000*). The only possible risk that the researcher can think of is emotional responses, such as stress from academics or new social situations. There may be distress that you convey through your answers when discussing your first semester of college. If there is any emotion being brought about from questions I ask, the counseling center’s phone number will be available for you

(Counseling Services Center (Wellness Center) on X College's Campus - Phone Number: (000) 000-0000). This study will benefit you by allowing you to process through your orientation experience and give feedback for how your orientation experience was (both benefits and improvements needed). It will also benefit me in my understanding of the importance of implementing a first-year orientation program during a student's first-year in college. This research will also allow universities to examine their own orientation programs and use the feedback from my interviews to assess their own first-year orientation program.

6. Safeguards of Data

I will not identify you during my thesis defense or in my research paper in general. Your name will be changed to protect your true identity. Data will be published, but I will not use your real name in the final thesis/presentation when I defend. The data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

7. Freedom to withdraw from the study

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw from the study, the information gathered at that point will be destroyed and you will not be penalized at all.

8. Third Party Referral

Should you have any questions about this project at any time, feel free to contact Katie Evensen at:
000-000-0000 or at katie_evensen@xuniversity.edu.

X University's Address is 0 X Avenue, X X, 00000

If you have any questions about your treatment as a participant in this study, please call or write to my supervisor:

*(Name), Thesis Supervisor, X University
000 W. X Avenue, City State, 00000*

Although Dr. ... will ask your name, all questions are kept in confidence.

9. If you have any questions regarding this research, your interview, your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject, it can be directed to X College's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Chair of the IRB, Dr. ..., can be contacted at name@xuniversity.edu or 000-000-0000

INFORMED CONSENT

SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I attest to being 18 years of age or older and I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

Subject's Printed Name: _____

Subject's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ **Date:** _____

An e-mail is needed for the researcher if she needs to contact you to clarify or verify anything you stated during the interview to make sure she understood and heard and your comments correctly. There will be no "going through someone else" any further at this point for reasons of confidentiality and privacy. The researcher will be directly contacting you, as the participant if needed.

E-Mail: _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. *Will you provide me with general answers? Are you male, female, or other? Or, do you prefer not to answer?*
2. *Are you an on-campus resident or a commuter? Why did you choose to (either) live on campus/commute?*
3. *As a first-year student transitioning from high school to X College, did you take a gap year? Also, what were your expectations prior to arriving on campus? Expectations after arriving on campus?*
4. *Were you well aware of the “.....” program that X College provides for first-year students? If so, how? If not, why not?*
5. *Did you attend “.....” program? How many days of the program did you attend? If not all of the days, why?*
6. *During the programs X College provided throughout the orientation program, which ones did you enjoy the most? The least?*
7. *Which program/event made you feel most welcomed? Helped you to feel more adjusted to college?*
8. *Emotionally, what was the most difficult part transition to college? How, if at all, did orientation provide support for your transition?*
9. *What benefits, because of the orientation program, were visible to you before school even began? (Ex: Feeling more included on campus, confident with friendships, better relationships with faculty, etc.)*
10. *What were the biggest factors after attending orientation?*

