

Even a Weekend Works: The Value of a Weekend-Long Orientation Program on First-Year College Students

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Helping first-year students become involved in college via semester- or year-long first-year orientation programs is a major undertaking for college and university administrators. The effect of a weekend-long orientation program on students' involvement in college had yet to be determined until the current study. The authors describe such a program and evaluate its utility. Results revealed that incoming first-year students who attended a weekend-long orientation program were more involved in school during their first year, than those who did not attend the program.

A student's involvement in college life is an important issue for staff and administrators at colleges and universities. These individuals hope that orientation programs aimed specifically for first-year students will aid in their adjustment to and involvement in college. Many schools offer orientation programs of varying lengths with different degrees of success. The purpose of this study is to describe an orientation program that lasted specifically for only one weekend. An examination of this program demonstrates that even one brief, but highly involved, concentrated weekend can aid incoming first-year students in becoming involved in college.

Orientation Programs

First-year (or freshman) orientation programs, seminars, or courses help in increasing students' involvement in college (Boudreau & Kromey, 1994; Derby & Smith, 2004; Gass, 1990; Gass, Garvey, & Sugarman, 2003; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Schwitzer, McGovern, & Robbins, 1991). Some first-year orientation programs have included classes that require assigned readings and journaling (Davis-Underwood & Lee, 1994), courses taught by college deans or directors (Robinson, 1989), or weekly meetings in which students participate in campus events, hold discussion sessions and "share information, vent their concerns, learn about university resources, and establish friendships" (Sullivan, 1994, p. 85). More recent, less traditional programs allow students to live in the university residence halls the summer before their first year, involve students in community service around the university, and encourage students to

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learn more about lesser-known sciences, like ocean engineering and nuclear science (Greene & Greene, 2005).

Outdoor programs, such as wilderness or adventure programs, have also gained popularity for freshman orientation programs. According to Berman and Davis-Berman (2000), outdoor education and experiential learning programs exist for a variety of reasons ranging from recreation and camping to adventure therapy, personal growth, and even college orientation. In a survey of 49 colleges that use wilderness orientation programs, O'Keefe (1988) found that the majority of these programs were adventure-based, featuring such activities as backpacking, canoeing, rock climbing, and ropes courses. In fact, as of 2003, there were as many as 200 of these programs across the country (Troop, 2003). Wilderness orientation programs are believed to have lasting effects on participating students. For example, a qualitative study by Gass, Garvey, and Sugarman (2003) indicated that individuals who participated in a wilderness orientation during college reported positive effects (i.e., forming long-lasting support networks, challenging previously held assumptions about others) for as long as 17 years after participating in the program.

Many different orientation programs work (Greene & Greene, 2005). However, the majority of such programs last throughout the first one or two semesters of a student's collegiate career. For example, a study by Derby and Smith (2004) showed that students who took a semester-long orientation class at a community college were more likely to complete their degree at the college and do so without taking breaks between semesters. In the current study, the researchers determine the effectiveness of a program that lasts for only one weekend during the summer between participants' senior year in high school and first year in college. In the following pages, we will describe this condensed program and assess its relationship to participants' level of involvement in the school and community.

Overview of the Weekend-Long Orientation Program

Students who attended the weekend-long orientation program were incoming first-year students at a large university in the Southeast that enrolls more than 20,000 undergraduates and more than 8,000 graduate students. The university is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Over 75% of undergraduates are in-state residents, 6% are international, and over 55% are female. The university has about 500 registered student organizations and offers 19 baccalaureate degrees in more than 150 fields.

Two separate sessions of the orientation program took place during two separate weekends on a remote campsite retreat in July of 2002. The university's Office of Student Affairs sponsored the event. Junior and senior students who wanted to be part of the orientation program as group leaders completed an application process and interviewed during the spring semester before the program began; 30 junior and senior students were chosen by the Office of Student Affairs to be group leaders during both

sessions. These student group leaders participated in training sessions before the actual summer orientation program. After the orientation program, group leaders remained in touch with program attendees and served as student mentors. Student Affairs staff and student leaders were part of both weekend sessions. A brochure was mailed to each incoming first-year student to the university in the spring semester of their senior year in high school. Incoming first-year students had the choice to attend the program. Each session consisted of the same activities and goals. The three main themes or purposes of the orientation program were (a) for program attendees to get to know each other and network with each other; (b) for program attendees to enhance their self-awareness; and (c) to supply information to facilitate adjustment to and involvement in college life for each program attendee.

To introduce the first theme, program attendees were divided into groups numbered from 7 to 10, with a junior or senior college student serving as group leader during the weekend. This student continued as a mentor when the academic year started. Each attendee became acquainted with others in the group by bringing an item that described himself or herself and explaining it to the group, and through teambuilding activities. For example, the teams built straw towers, which is a group activity and team-building exercise in which the group builds the highest tower possible only using plastic straws and straight pins. Through the weekend, each program attendee met fellow first-year students, several junior and senior students, and administrators, faculty, and staff from the college who primarily work with new students. Program attendees also spent time together during meals and other activities, including a dance party. By getting to know each other personally in those groups and interacting within their group through teambuilding activities, each program attendee became familiar with other incoming first-year students and their student mentor, who facilitated the process of getting to know others and starting a network of friends. By eating meals with others and attending activities like the dance party, program attendees could interact and broaden their network of friends and peers, helping the program attendees get to know people.

A second purpose of the orientation program was for program attendees to learn more about themselves. Team-building exercises, completing and then receiving feedback from a leadership inventory specifically designed for college students (the Student Leadership Practices Inventory; Posner & Brodsky, 1992), and participation in a project focusing on the use of newly-learned leadership skills were all aimed at increasing the program attendees' self-awareness. Program attendees learned about their leadership styles, skills, potential, and personal strengths and weaknesses, and they learned how to develop those skills. By participating in team-building exercises and by taking and receiving immediate feedback from the leadership inventory, program attendees could readily examine their own strengths and weaknesses, their leadership styles, and how they interacted with others and worked together on projects, which would help the new students learn more about themselves.

A third theme was supplying program attendees with information about college life. For example, a poster session created awareness of activities that program attendees

could become involved in when school started, including fraternities and sororities, student government, residence hall associations, religious organizations, and intramural sports. Subsequently, students took part in several informational workshops which focused on a variety of topics such as conflict management, relationship issues, internships and jobs to complement academics, campus leadership opportunities on campus, enhancing future job applications and interview skills, and explanations about service opportunities and other upcoming events both on campus and in the community. Participants also viewed videos about the history and traditions of the school and about diversity awareness. Students continued to meet in their small groups to reflect and process the information given throughout the weekend. Through these activities, program attendees gained information about the college, as well as about activities they could become involved in once the school year started.

On the surface, it seemed that this weekend-long program could be effective for increasing the involvement of incoming first-year students to college. Through this weekend-long orientation program, students met a variety of people, increased in their own self-awareness, and learned how to become involved on and off campus. But does this weekend-long program actually work? In other words, does the weekend-long orientation program have a measurable and significant impact on whether students become involved in college during their first year? The researchers hypothesized that those who attended the program were more likely to be involved both inside and outside the college classroom when compared to first-year students who did not attend the program.

Method

Participants

Two hundred twenty-four incoming first-year students to a large university in the Southeast attended the weekend-long orientation program in the summer of 2002. Of the 224 students, 53 elected to participate in this study (38 males and 15 females). Additionally, 64 first-year students (30 males and 34 females) who did not attend the program were used as a comparison group. Members of the comparison group were students in the "Introduction to Psychology" course. These students were also in their first year of college and volunteered to be a part of this study to fulfill a class participation requirement, with the stipulation that they did not attend the weekend-long orientation program. The opportunity was open for a 3-week time period during the spring semester. The 64 students of the comparison group took their own version of the questionnaire (discussed below in the "Materials" section) during that 3-week time period. After the 3 weeks, there were no more opportunities to collect data.

Materials

The aforementioned 53 participants of the weekend-long program completed a

50-item questionnaire over the Internet. Items on this questionnaire addressed demographic data, time spent studying and preparing for classes, frequency of personal contact with faculty and staff, the types of friendships they had, involvement in different groups, and attendance at certain school functions. There were also items that asked students how the weekend-long orientation program influenced their adjustment to college, their networking capabilities on and off campus, and their sense of community on campus. There were a variety of question-and-answer formats: some items consisted of a yes/no answer format, some were based on Likert-type scales, and some were open-ended.

Those who did not attend the weekend-long orientation program were given another version of the questionnaire with only 32 items in a paper-and-pencil format. This questionnaire included many of the same questions as the previous one, with the exception that those who attended the program were asked about how it influenced them, while those who did not attend the program were asked why they did not attend and if they would have attended alternative programs.

Procedure

Data were gathered during February and March of 2003 (during the second semester of the participants' first year). All 224 program attendees were asked through electronic mail to complete the questionnaire via the Internet on a voluntary basis. As previously discussed, 53 of the 224 students elected to participate and complete the questionnaire. During that same time period, those who did not attend the weekend-long orientation program completed the other version of the questionnaire.

Results

Table 1 summarizes background and demographic data for the program attendees as well as those who did not attend the weekend-long orientation program. Both groups were similar with regard to background information.

By comparing the responses to items used on both questionnaires, several 1-tailed t-tests and nonparametric tests (for nominal- and ordinal-scaled data) with an alpha level set at .05 were conducted to test whether there were significant differences between those who did and those who did not attend the orientation program. Table 2 includes the means and standard deviations of responses on open-ended questions and those from the Likert-scales. Results from t-tests (cases with missing data excluded by analysis) reveal that there are significant differences between program attendees and the comparison group. Program attendees missed fewer classes [$t(115) = 5.02, p < .001$], took part in more extracurricular activities [$t(109) = -4.61, p < .001$], were more likely to attend a lecture or panel discussion [$t(115) = -2.39, p < .01$], were more likely to become friends with those whose interests were different than their own [$t(115) = -2.12, p < .05$], and were more likely to talk to faculty/staff about personal concerns [$t(115) = -1.96, p < .05$] when compared to the comparison group.

All questions with a yes/no response format were analyzed using chi-square tests (see Table 3 for percentages; cases excluded by analysis). These tests revealed additional significant differences between program attendees and the comparison group. More program attendees attended Fall Convocation [$\chi^2 (1) = 11.44, p < .01$], attended nighttime functions at the university [$\chi^2 (1) = 3.84, p < .05$], attended and participated in homecoming activities [$\chi^2 (1) = 5.44, p < .05$], were more involved in on-campus committees, organizations, or projects [$\chi^2 (1) = 3.84, p < .05$], and were more likely to hold a leadership position/office for a club or organization [$\chi^2 (1) = 8.40, p < .01$] than the comparison group.

Though not statistically significant, several other findings revealed similar trends in support of program attendees being more involved on campus than those who did not attend the weekend-long orientation program. Program attendees, as compared to those who did not attend the weekend-long orientation program were more likely to (a) meet with professors after class or during office hours [$t (115) = -1.32, p = .09$]; (b) attend a cultural event [$t (115) = -.30, p = .38$]; (c) attend an intercollegiate sporting event [$\chi^2 (1) = 3.63, p = .057$]; (d) be involved in off-campus committees or student organizations or projects [$\chi^2 (1) = 1.74, p = .187$]; (e) be satisfied with their college experience in general [$t (115) = -.88, p = .19$]; and (f) be more satisfied about life in general [$t (115) = -.38, p = .35$].

Analysis of Supplementary Data

Though not the initial focus of the study, a few responses for both groups (program attendees and the comparison group) were open-ended and qualitative in nature. These questions produced qualitative data, which are beneficial to focusing on content and understanding participants' meaning of events and the context within which participants act (Creswell, 1994; Maxwell, 1998; Sechrest & Sidani, 1995).

Responses to these open-ended questions were content-analyzed and appropriately categorized. One of these open-ended questions asked why students in the comparison group did not attend the program. Of the 64 in the comparison group, a total of 18 participants did not remember receiving the initial brochure in the mail. Another 14 believed the orientation program did not sound fun or interesting while another 14 already had summer plans during the weekend the orientation sessions were to take place. Additionally, 11 participants had a summer job, 3 wanted to spend time with family and friends, 2 said the cost of the program was the reason why they did not attend the program, 1 believed a sibling already attending the university was sufficient exposure, and 1 did not provide an answer.

Some questions were written specifically for program attendees. These students were asked if they still kept in contact with their junior or senior group leader and subsequent student mentor. Of the 53 program attendees, 22 (41%) said they did not stay in contact with their group leader. Reasons included were that no contact was made once the school year started (15 responses); that there was no time to keep in contact (5 responses); and that keeping in contact with the group leader was not necessary for the program attendee

(2 responses).

Another related question asked if attendees remained in contact with each other. Of the 53 program attendees, only two reported that they did not continue any peer relationships beyond the program weekend. Both felt as if they did not make friends during the program.

Additional questions were asked to both groups about whether students would have wanted to attend alternative programs. Had it been offered, 47% of program attendees and 90% of the comparison group would have been interested in attending a precollege outdoor adventure weekend including hiking, white-water rafting, or sea kayaking. Further, had it been offered, 41% of program attendees and 76% of the comparison group would have been interested in attending a precollege service weekend including a Habitat for Humanity build or cleaning a river. Finally, had it been offered, 47% of program attendees and 68% of the comparison group would have been interested in attending a precollege cultural weekend including music, arts, theater, and dance.

Discussion

The results clearly illustrate that those who attended the weekend-long orientation program were more likely than those who did not attend the program to be involved as students in the classroom, be acquainted with their professors away from the classroom, attend extracurricular activities, join groups or committees, and act as leaders on campus. In other words, over several criteria, those who attended the weekend-long orientation program were more involved inside and outside the classroom than those who did not attend the program. These results mirror much of the previous research that shows that first-year orientation programs increase involvement of first-year college students (Davis-Underwood & Lee, 1994; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999). However, what distinguished the current study's findings from other research findings on orientation programs is that the present results illustrate how one weekend can apparently impact college students.

As a result of the weekend orientation program, when program attendees came to campus on the first day, they already knew at least 7 to 10 other first-year students from their own program group, and in many cases, other first-year students from the orientation program. Additionally, program attendees already had students from the junior and senior class as mentors to guide them with problems they may have in college. Moreover, program attendees knew several other faculty and staff members. Through the workshops and information sessions, the program attendees were familiar with what the university had to offer in terms of organizations and extracurricular activities. They may have had more resources for handling common college problems such as roommate conflicts and time management issues. The weekend-long orientation program apparently contributed to their ability to be involved both inside and outside the classroom.

Limitations and Future Research

Even though the results strongly suggest that the program was successful, there are some limitations in this study. For example, although 224 students attended the program, only 53 (approximately 25%) chose to respond to the questionnaire. Although this response rate can be considered typical in survey research, the results could have been more robust by an increase in responses from those who attended the weekend-long orientation program.

Secondly, it is interesting to note that the first-semester college grade point averages (GPAs) of those who attended the program were significantly higher than the comparison group. More specifically, on a 4-point scale, the first-semester college GPA of program attendees was 3.41, which was significantly higher than the comparison's group GPA of 3.02 [$t(113) = -3.77, p < .001$]. One conclusion is that the program was so successful that those who attended the program had a better chance of earning higher grades, which is an important predictor in college adjustment and even in future retention (Braunstein & McGrath, 1997; Mallinckrodt, 1988; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Sullivan, 1994). However, as no data on academic background were collected prior to the orientation program, it remains unknown if attendees earned higher grades than non-attendees, or if the program actually made a difference in grades.

Another potential limitation concerns the voluntary nature of the orientation program. Perhaps those students who sought the opportunity of attending a weekend-long orientation program differed from those who did not. Program attendees may have been more proactive or motivated, and therefore performed better academically and socially than those who did not attend the weekend-long orientation program. In other words, program attendees may already have had some of the tools necessary to be successful college students. Hence, one must be cautious in drawing conclusions about the effects of a weekend-long orientation program.

Finally, another limitation could be the living locations for students in this study.¹ Table 1 shows that 94% of program attendees who volunteered to take part in this study lived on campus, while only 78% of the comparison group lived on campus. This significant difference between the two groups [$\chi^2(1) = 6.14, p < .05$] could be problematic since living on campus could facilitate the ability to become involved on campus. If a student were already on campus, it could be easier for that student to meet other friends on campus, to meet faculty at their offices on campus, and to take part in campus activities. It is possible that living on campus could affect the ability to become more involved on campus. However, it is important to also note, that even though a higher percentage of program attendees lived on campus than the comparison group as already reported in the "Results" section, more program attendees were involved in off-campus committees, organizations, and projects than the comparison group. This fact could offer a counter-argument to the "living location" limitation.

¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

Conclusion

Another way to evaluate the success of this weekend program would be to ask the attendees what they thought of the program itself. Results from one item of the questionnaire revealed that if program attendees had the summer before their first year in college to do over again, 70% of program attendees would have still attended the orientation program. Moreover, of the program attendees surveyed, 87% believed the program had at least some influence in creating a sense of community for them at the university. Additionally, 78% of program attendees surveyed believed the weekend-long orientation program had at least some influence in assisting their networking on campus, and more than a quarter of the program attendees surveyed believed the same for their networking in the community outside of campus. These statistics show that for most program attendees, the program was worthwhile enough that they would be willing to do it again, and that the program greatly influenced their life on and off campus.

This weekend-long orientation program helped incoming first-year students build relationships and friendships with others, provided ways for students to become involved inside and outside the classroom, enhanced the ability to network both on- and off-campus, and fostered a sense of community. While it cannot be concluded that attending the program *caused* students to become more involved students, we can say there is a strong relationship between the weekend-long orientation program and a first-year student's involvement in college.

Many colleges and universities strive to create programs to assist in increasing students' involvement in college. Many of these programs last a full semester or a full year. Prior to the present study, the effects of a weekend-long orientation program had yet to be researched. The results of this study indicate that students who attended this weekend-long program were more involved as students both inside and outside the classroom when compared to students who did not attend the program. The outcomes from this program are consistent with other semester or full-year orientation approaches geared for first-year students. However, these findings are the first in connecting a well-developed and carefully planned weekend orientation program to increased involvement of first-year students at a university. From this study, it appears that a weekend can make a difference in the college life of first-year students.

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TABLE 1

Background and Demographic Data of the Participants

Demographic and Background Data	Program Attendees	Comparison Group
Race – Caucasian	87%	84%
Residence – On campus	94%	78%
Intercollegiate sport participation	8%	11%
Proposed college destination:		
Arts and Sciences	45%	39%
Business	13%	17%
Desire for post-college degrees	87%	75%
Number of First-Semester Credit Hours	14	13

TABLE 2

Means and Standard Deviations of the Responses of Program Attendees versus Comparison Group for Open-Ended Questions and Likert Scales

Question	Program Attendees		Comparison Group		t-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
How many classes do you miss per week?	.57 ^a	.87	1.72 ^a	1.47	5.02***
How many extracurricular activities are you a part of?	3.13 ^a	2.01	1.63 ^a	1.43	-4.61***
How often have you					
attended lecture or panel discussion?	2.09 ^b	1.04	1.67 ^b	.87	-2.39**
become friends with those whose interests are different?	3.70 ^b	.95	3.33 ^b	.93	-2.12*
talked to faculty/staff about personal concerns?	2.19 ^b	1.04	1.86 ^b	.77	-1.96*
meet with professor after class or during office hours?	2.74 ^b	.88	2.52 ^b	.91	-1.32
attended a cultural event (concert, play, art exhibit)?	2.81 ^b	.79	2.77 ^b	.85	-.30
How satisfied are you with college experience in general?	3.53 ^c	.61	3.42 ^c	.69	-.88
How satisfied are you with your life in general?	3.45 ^c	.70	3.41 ^c	.64	-.38

Note. ^aOpen-ended questions. ^bResponses based on 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Very Often. ^cResponses based on 4-point Likert scale: 1 = Not Satisfied; 2 = A Little Satisfied; 3 = Satisfied; 4 = Very satisfied.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 3

Percentages of Yes/No Responses of Program Attendees versus Comparison Group

Question	Program Attendees		Comparison Group		χ^2
	% Yes	% No	% Yes	% No	
Have you attended:					
Fall Convocation (program welcoming students to school)?	39.6	60.4	12.5	81.3	11.44**
Nighttime functions of the University?	60.4	39.6	42.2	57.8	3.84*
Homecoming Activities (e.g. banner competition, parades)?	69.8	30.2	48.4	51.6	5.44*
Intercollegiate sporting events?	98.1	1.9	89.1	10.9	3.63
Are you involved in an off-campus committee, organization, project?	52.8	47.2	40.6	59.4	.187
Are you involved in an on-campus committee, organization, project?	83.0	17.0	45.3	54.7	3.84*
Are you in a leadership position/office for a club or organization?	43.4	56.6	18.8	81.3	8.40**

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.