

Regular Versus Shorter Orientation: A Comparison Study of Student Characteristics and Retention

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This study compared college student characteristics of those who attended regular and shorter orientation sessions at a state university over a period of four years. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and results indicated that significant differences existed between the students who attended the regular orientation and those who attended a shorter orientation. Further analysis using linear and logistic regression indicated that type of orientation session attended did not significantly affect the outcomes of retention, fall and spring grade point average (GPAs), and academic status beyond the effects of student background characteristics. Recommendations focused on college student experiences.

First-year students applying to college are traditionally invited to attend an orientation program before the start of their first semester of classes to acculturate to the setting, services, and facilities of campus life. Research on student retention shows the importance of facilitating student awareness by offering programs that inform students about campus facilities, services, and resources available to them at higher education institutions. Moxley, Najour-Durack, and Dumbrigue (2001) noted “a principal vehicle of awareness building is student orientation or familiarization. Orientations are often the first opportunity for staff to make an impression on students” (p. 77). Furthermore, it was noted that orientations allow students to get to know each other, to meet faculty, and campus personnel (Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996). Students who attend orientation sessions are more likely to become comfortable and aware of the campus community, which facilitates student integration and student success (Tinto, 1987). Finally, in terms of academic enhancement, Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) note that “orientation to university teaching and learning is part of the process of academic adjustment” (p. 119); thus, orientation programs assist university students in meeting academic demands and have the effect of improving attitudes towards learning and reducing anxiety.

Many factors impact students’ transitions to higher education. For instance,

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students who register late have been found less likely to continue their studies to the spring semester when compared with students who register early or on time (Smith, Street, & Olivarez, 2002). It has also been noted that late returning registrants have lower grade point averages (GPAs) and higher withdrawal rates, were less likely to persist to the next semester, and completed fewer courses during the semester (Rode, 2005; Smith et al., 2002).

The purpose of this study is to compare the characteristics of students who attended both the regular and shorter orientation sessions at a four-year state university in northwest Ohio. This study was developed to investigate the premise that students who attended the shorter orientation session and registration were harder to retain than the students who attended the regular orientation. The primary research questions were as follows: (1) what is the difference between students who attended regular orientation and students who attended the shorter orientation? and (2) is there a significant difference between first-to-second semester retention for those who attended the shorter orientation compared to those who attended regular orientation and registration sessions?

Methods

Sample

This study took place at a four-year, public, primary residential university. Student enrollment in the fall semester of 2004 was 18,989, serving mostly full-time undergraduate students (Carnegie Foundation, n. d.). Students were divided into two groups: individuals who attended regular orientation and registration ($N = 14,088$) and those who attended a shorter orientation ($N = 438$) over a period of four academic years. Students were compared in terms of their personal characteristics such as gender, race, age, living arrangements, and state of residence. This study used a normative research question in order to compare the students who attended the regular orientation with those who attended the shorter orientation.

Procedure

A descriptive research design was used to provide a profile of the students who attended both types of orientation. This research used existing data collected through secondary sources such as administrative records. All students in the database who attended the two distinct types of orientations were analyzed using descriptive statistics (counts, percentages, and means) and univariate analysis (t tests and chi-square cross tabulations). In order to improve recommendations, two-stage linear and logistic regressions were used to determine if student characteristics significantly affected the outcomes, such as retention, fall and spring GPAs, and academic status.

Results

Results have been organized to answer the initial research questions. The first section addresses student characteristics in relation to orientation attendance. The second section observes retention characteristics related to orientation type.

Orientation Attendee Characteristics

Age. A *t* test for independent means was used to determine if age was significantly different among the students who attended the regular orientation and those who attended the shorter orientation session. Results indicated that students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely ($p < .001$) to be slightly older (mean = 18.98) than the students who attended the regular orientation (mean = 18.63).

Gender and Ethnicity. Data from a total of 14,526 students were used in this study. Females outnumbered males at both types of orientation. A total of 57.8% ($n = 8,137$) females attended the regular orientation while 52.3% ($n = 229$) attended the shorter orientation session. Results of a *t* test indicated a significant difference ($p = .022$) in orientation attendance between the two gender groups as the difference between males and females who attended the regular orientation was 15.6% and the difference between males and females who attended the shorter orientation session was 4.6%.

Participants were identified according to race, and a significant difference ($p < .001$) was found among the two groups of students. Asian, Black, Hispanic, and international students were more likely to attend the shorter orientation session whereas students from a Caucasian background were more likely to attend the regular orientation session.

TABLE 1

Summary of Race and Orientation Attendance

	Regular Orientation		Shorter Orientation	
	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>
American Indian	0.5	65	0.2	1
Asian	0.7	101	2.5	11
Black	6.0	852	17.6	77
Hispanic	15.5	68	2.7	381
International Student	0.4	51	6.6	29
Unknown	2.6	10	2.3	10
White	87.1	12,273	55.3	242

Place of Residence. A significant difference ($p < .001$) was found between the two groups of orientation attendees in relation to place of residence. A greater number of students who attended the shorter orientation session were identified as living off campus when compared to students who attended the regular orientation. Of students who attended the regular orientation, 92.2% ($n = 12,983$) lived on campus and 7.8% ($n = 1,105$) lived off campus. Of students who attended the shorter orientation session 80.4% ($n = 352$) lived on campus, while 19.6% ($n = 86$) lived off campus.

Results indicated that students who attended the regular orientation and the shorter orientation differed significantly ($p < .001$) in terms of their state of residence. Students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely to be international students and out-of-state residents. Only 0.3% ($n = 49$) of the students who attended the regular orientation were international students, 7.7% ($n = 1,087$) of students were out-of-state residents, and 91.9% ($n = 12,952$) were Ohio residents. Of the students who attended the shorter orientation session, 6.6% ($n = 29$) were international students, 24.9% ($n = 109$) were out-of-state residents, and 68.5% ($n = 300$) were Ohio residents.

College Major. A chi-square test for significance indicated a difference ($p < .001$) in relation to the choices of academic college between the regular orientation and the shorter orientation group of students. Students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely to be in the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Health and Human Services, and Academic Enhancement (which provides students the opportunity to enroll in college courses while receiving academic supports to enable a successful transition to the University environment).

TABLE 2

Summary of College of Choice and Orientation Attendance

	Regular Orientation		Shorter Orientation	
	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>
Arts and Science	25.3	3,570	31.3	137
College of Academic Enhancement	21.3	2,997	25.6	112
College of Education	23.6	3,331	14.4	63
College of Business Administration	13.6	1,921	13.5	59
College of Health and Human Services	7.8	1,096	8.4	37
Musical Arts	2.8	400	2.7	12
College of Technology	5.5	772	3.9	17

In relation to college major, a chi-square test indicated that students in both groups were significantly different ($p < .001$). Students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely to declare their major as “undecided,” 21.9% ($n = 96$) compared to 17.9% ($n = 2,525$) of those attending the regular orientation.

Developmental Classes. A chi-square test indicated a significant difference was found between the two groups concerning the placement of students in developmental classes ($p < .001$). Students who attended the shorter orientation were less likely to place in developmental classes. Of students who attended the shorter orientation session, 7.3% ($n = 32$) required developmental English classes and 11.8% ($n = 1,657$) of the students who attended the regular orientation required this class. Similarly, a greater number of students (21.8%, $n = 3,075$) who attended the regular orientation, were placed in developmental math classes compared to (13.9%, $n = 61$) students who attended the shorter orientation session. Of the students who attended the shorter orientation session, 16.4% ($n = 72$) placed in developmental reading classes and 23.7% ($n = 3,335$) of the students who attended the regular orientation placed in this class.

Learning Communities. Significant differences between orientation groups were found for some living learning communities and programs. Students who attended the shorter orientation session were less likely to enroll in learning communities. A total of 3.6% ($n = 512$) of the students who attended the regular orientation registered with a living learning community, while 1.6% ($n = 7$) of the students who attended the shorter orientation session participated in a learning community. A total of 7% ($n = 986$) of the students who attended the regular orientation registered with an honors learning community, while 0.5% ($n = 2$) of students who attended the shorter orientation session belonged to this type of learning community.

Campus Programs. Students who attended the shorter orientation session were less likely to participate in university-wide programs such as structured mentoring. Of the students who attended the regular orientation, 16.8% ($n = 1,784$) were registered with a first-year moral values and critical thinking program. Only 1.4% ($n = 5$) of the students who attended the shorter orientation session participated in this program. A total of 2.8% ($n = 400$) of the students who attended the regular orientation registered with community literacy programs while 0.7% ($n = 3$) of the students who attended the shorter orientation session participated in this program. Students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely to join multicultural programs. A total of 7.1% ($n = 1,006$) of the students who attended the regular orientation registered with multicultural programs while 25.6% ($n = 112$) of the students who attended the shorter orientation session participated in this program.

Students who attended the shorter orientation session were significantly less likely to register in university 100-level courses ($p < .001$). A total of 25.4% ($n = 3,577$) of the students who attended the regular orientation registered in university 100-level courses while 11% ($n = 48$) of the students who attended the shorter orientation session enrolled in this course.

Retention Characteristics

Academic Standing. Students who attended the shorter orientation session were significantly more likely to withdraw, be on probation, or in academic warning by the end of the fall semester ($p < .001$). They were also less likely to be on the Dean's list or in good academic standing. At the end of the fall semester, 1.5% ($n = 205$) of students who attended the regular orientation had withdrawn from the university. A total of 2.7% ($n = 12$) of students who attended the shorter orientation session withdrew from the institution before the end of the fall semester. It was found that 16.2% ($n = 2,284$) of students who attended the regular orientation were on the Dean's list, while only 6.8% ($n = 30$) of students who attended the shorter orientation session were on the Dean's list. A total of 63.4% ($n = 8,926$) of the students who attended the regular orientation were in good standing at the end of the fall semester compared with 54.1% ($n = 237$) of the students who attended the shorter orientation session. In relation to academic probation, it was found that 10.9% ($n = 1,532$) of the students who attended the regular orientation were on probation and 26.3% ($n = 115$) of students who attended the shorter orientation session were on academic probation at the end of the fall semester. In relation to academic warning, it was found that 8.1% ($n = 1,141$) of the students who attended the regular orientation were on academic warning and 10% ($n = 44$) of the students who attended the shorter orientation session were on academic warning at the end of the fall semester.

Student Retention. Students who attended the shorter orientation session were significantly less likely to be retained at the end of the fall semester ($p < .001$). At the end of the fall semester 75.8% ($n = 7,844$) of students who attended the regular orientation were retained while 60.9% ($n = 187$) of the students who attended the shorter orientation session were retained.

Grade Point Average. Students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely to have a significantly lower GPA at the end of the fall semester ($p < .001$). For the students who attended the regular orientation, their mean GPA was 2.69 ($n = 13,883$; $SD = .937$) while students who attended the shorter orientation session had a mean GPA of 2.16 ($n = 426$; $SD = 1.131$). Students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely to have a lower GPA at the end of the spring semester as well. A significant difference ($p < .001$) was found between the two groups. Students who attended the regular orientation had a mean GPA of 2.769 ($n = 8,802$; $SD = .7862$) while students who attended the shorter orientation session had a mean GPA of 2.495 ($n = 229$; $SD = .8691$).

Credit Hours Completed. Students who attended the shorter orientation session were significantly more likely to attempt and to complete less credit hours during the fall semester ($p < .001$). Students who attended the regular orientation attempted a mean of 15.09 credit hours ($N = 14,088$; $SD = 1.143$) while the students who attended the shorter orientation session attempted a mean of 14.75 credit hours during the fall semester ($N = 438$; $SD = 1.275$). A significant difference was found ($p < .001$) between the two groups in the number of credit hours completed in the fall semester. Students who attended the regular orientation

completed a mean of 14.79 credit hours ($n = 13,883$; $SD = 6.055$) while the students who attended the shorter orientation session completed a mean of 12.64 credit hours ($n = 426$; $SD = 6.478$). It is important to note that credit hours accumulate; therefore if a student took credit hours at this institution while in high school (through post-secondary enrollment options) these credit hours would have been included in the total credit hours completed by the student.

Orientation Attendance and Retention. A two-stage linear and logistic regression procedure was used to investigate the effect of types of orientation session predicted on the outcomes beyond the effect of student background characteristics. Results showed that model fit (R^2) was not significantly improved by addition of the type of orientation session. Linear regression was conducted to determine if student input characteristics and participation in the shorter orientation session predicted fall GPA and spring GPA. Regression results indicated that the overall model did not predict fall GPA (see Table 3) or spring GPA (see Table 4).

A two-stage logistic regression was conducted to determine if student input characteristics and participation in the shorter orientation session predicted fall and spring retention and academic status. Regression results indicated that the overall model did not predict fall retention (see Table 5), spring retention (see Table 6) or academic status (see Table 7).

TABLE 3

Linear Regression Analysis Summary Predicting Fall GPA (N = 14,526)

Variables	<u>B</u>	<u>SEB</u>	<u>β</u>	R ²	<u>ΔR²</u>
Step 1				.25	
Age	.068	.011	.046*		
Stateres	-.053	.026	-.015*		
HS GPA	1.006	.016	.478*		
Gender	.083	.015	.044*		
Ethnicity	-.247	.023	-.081*		
Step 2				.25	.007
Age	.077	.011	.051*		
Stateres	-.078	.026	-.023*		
HSGPA	1.002	.016	.476*		
Gender	.084	.015	.044*		
Ethnicity	-.212	.023	-.070*		
Orien-short	-.498	.043	-.086*		

* $p < .05$.

TABLE 4

Linear Regression Analysis Summary Predicting Spring GPA (N = 14,526)

Variables	<u>B</u>	<u>SEB</u>	<u>β</u>	R ²	<u>ΔR²</u>
Step 1				.29	
Age	.057	.012	.042*		
Stateres	.007	.027	.002		
HS GPA	.923	.016	.519*		
Gender	.078	.015	.048*		
Ethnicity	-.225	.024	-.087*		
Step 2				.29	.001
Age	.061	.012	.046*		
Stateres	-.005	.027	-.002		
HSGPA	.922	.016	.519*		
Gender	.078	.015	.049*		
Ethnicity	-.212	.024	-.081*		
Orien-short	-.208	.049	-.039*		

**p* < .05.

TABLE 5

Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Fall Retention

Variables	<u>B</u>	<u>SE</u>	R ²	Odds ratio	Wald statistic
Step 1			.04		
Age	-.038	.032		.963	1.360
Stateres	.047	.090		1.049	.598
HS GPA	1.088	.056		2.967	380.276***
Gender	-.180	.049		.835	13.437***
Ethnicity	.040	.080		1.041	.257
Step 2			.04		
Age	-.021	.032		.979	.418
Stateres	.002	.091		1.002	.001
HSGPA	1.086	.056		2.964	378.236***
Gender	-.179	.049		13.243	.836***
Ethnicity	.106	.081		1.112	1.717
Orien-short	-.788	.132		.455	35.555***

p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

TABLE 6

Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Spring Retention

Variables	<u>B</u>	<u>SE</u>	R ²	Odds ratio	Wald statistic
Step 1			.016		
Age	-.031	.034		.970	.810
Stateres	-.129	.121		.879	1.126
HS GPA	1.047	.072		2.849	210.179***
Gender	-.240	.064		.787	14.007***
Ethnicity	.044	.101		1.045	.186
Step 2			.018		
Age	-.015	.036		.985	.182
Stateres	-.189	.123		.828	2.352
HSGPA	1.037	.072		2.819	205.376***
Gender	-.239	.064		.788	13.837***
Ethnicity	.118	.103		1.125	1.318
Orien-short	-.906	.414		.404	41.358***

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

TABLE 7

Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Academic Standing

Variables	<u>B</u>	<u>SE</u>	R ²	Odds ratio	Wald statistic
Step 1			.11		
Age	.129	.037		1.138	11.952**
Stateres	-.223	.087		.800	6.492*
HS GPA	1.984	.059		7.271	1139.982***
Gender	.170	.047		1.186	13.243***
Ethnicity	-.548	.069		.578	63.578***
Step 2			.11		
Age	.152	.038		1.164	16.192***
Stateres	-.284	.089		.752	10.304**
HSGPA	1.986	.059		7.283	1135.766***
Gender	.174	.047		1.190	13.752***
Ethnicity	-.480	.070		.619	47.499***
Orien-short	-.966	.119		.381	66.293***

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

Discussion

This research analyzed personal characteristics of students who attended shorter and regular orientation types and characteristics related to the retention and attrition of those students in higher education. In terms of personal characteristics, it was found that the number of females attending both types of orientations was greater than males. However, the relative percentage of males who attended the shorter orientation session was greater than the number of males who attended the regular orientation. In relation to the age category, students who attended the regular orientation were traditional students. Older students tended to attend the shorter orientation session. Other researchers have found similar results (Belcher & Patterson, 1990). This study found that students who attended shorter orientation sessions lived off campus. This could be related to the fact that a great number of these students were non-traditional age students, who perhaps held established employment and had familial responsibilities concurrent with their studies. York (2001) noted that "mature students tend to face different problems of transition, which derive from the passage of time since they were previously involved in the education system and, for some, the need to balance their own needs against those of dependants" (p. 116).

Belcher & Patterson (1990) found that students who register late were more likely to be Black or non-Hispanic, and least likely to be from a Hispanic background. Conversely, this study found that students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely to be from African American and Hispanic descent. In addition, it was found that international students and out-of-state students were more likely to attend the shorter orientation session instead of the regular orientation. Belcher and Patterson (1990) clarify this issue in that students registered late because of their late arrival into town. This could be an explanation for the late orientation attendance of international and out-of-state students.

In relation to college of choice, students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely to choose the College of Arts and Sciences, and the College of Academic Enhancement. When compared to the students who attended the regular orientation, fewer students chose the College of Education. Another important finding indicated that a significantly greater number of students who attended the shorter orientation session were undecided about their academic major. This finding could indicate that students who attended the shorter orientation were unsure of their career goals and expectations of higher education. Weiss (1999) found that "traditional late-admits ... were deficient in the areas of goals and commitment... and lacking in the areas of educational goals and major certainty" (p. 47). Similarly, research shows that students who lack career goals demonstrate less commitment to their academic endeavors (Sprandel, 1985).

The literature indicated that attendance in living-learning communities and participation in campus-wide programs can enhance academic performance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This study found that students who attended shorter orientation sessions were less likely to live in learning communities; however, students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely

to join multicultural programs. Since a great number of the students who attended the shorter orientation were from a Hispanic and African American heritage, perhaps they were motivated to participate in this specific program.

In terms of credit hours attempted and completed, students who attended the shorter orientation session attempted to take fewer credit hours than students who attended the regular orientation. Furthermore, students who attended the shorter orientation session were more likely to complete fewer credit hours than those students who attended the regular orientation and registration. A possible explanation for this finding could be that students who register late have fewer choices in terms of course seat availability. Hence, they might have to choose courses in which they are not very interested and, therefore, they might be more likely to drop those courses as the semester progresses.

In the transition to higher education, students who attended the shorter orientation session did not place in developmental classes and they did not have significantly different high school GPAs and ACT scores when compared to their peers who attended the regular orientation. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that students attending the shorter orientation session did not present deficits in their academic development prior to entering college. However, the analysis of retention characteristics demonstrated that the grades of students who attended the shorter orientation session were, at the end of the fall semester, significantly lower than their peers who attended the regular orientation session. These findings are reported in the fall semester GPA as well as on the students' academic standing as students who attended the shorter orientation were more likely to be on academic probation or warning at the end of the fall semester.

In relation to first-to-second semester retention between those who attended the shorter orientation session compared to those who attended regular orientation and registration sessions, it was found that students who attended the shorter orientation session were harder to retain than those who attended the regular orientation; however, results of logistic regression indicated that these students were not harder to retain because of their input characteristics such as age, high school GPA, ethnicity, and gender or shorter orientation session attendance. The failure to retain these students could be related to their experiences, or lack of participation in the campus community, uncertainty of career goals, and difficulty in deciding a major.

A possible theory that encompasses participants lack of successful transition to higher education has been put forth by Brennan (2001) in observing that "students who are not expert" at criteria for choosing and institution to study at or program of study, "may not have the ability to co-produce a high quality education" (p. 223). She further implied that these students may thus face strong levels of dissonance because of the incorrect selection of institution or program and, when enrolling, are therefore more likely to face transition problems when they enter the university.

Implications

Recommendations have been divided into two categories; recommendations for future research and recommendations for professional practice. Findings suggest the following recommendations for future research:

1. It may be useful to conduct focus groups with students who attended shorter orientation session to find out more about their college experiences (participation in activities and learning communities) during their first semester in higher education.
2. Inquiry should be made into the decision process of how shorter orientation session attendance influence students' choice of major and college.

In addition, the following suggestions are recommended for professional practice:

1. Advisors should encourage students attending the shorter orientation session to register for career exploration courses or take advantage of career assessment at the career center.
2. Use a proactive approach with incoming freshmen. During shorter orientation session, distribute a survey which will serve as a diagnostic, identifying individuals lacking in strong commitment to vocational choice and lacking in interest and motivation in becoming involved in campus life. An intervention can be planned for the spring semester in order to increase retention of these students. Interventions could include registration in campus wide programs, allowing these students to integrate into the campus community.

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