PCC Cascade START Lab: A "High-Tech, High-Touch" Approach to New Student Orientation

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In Summer 2009, a new model for student orientation was proposed and deployed as a pilot program at the Cascade Campus of Portland Community College. Traditional orientation models such as in-person sessions and online presentations had not been fully effective in meeting the needs of new students coming to Cascade. The Student Training, Advising, Registration, and Troubleshooting (START) Lab sought to reconcile these problems by merging the best aspects of the in-person and online orientation models in order to provide a more comprehensive and flexible orientation experience. This article describes the START Lab pilot program and presents evidence from literature and research to support the model. Current and future assessment protocols are discussed and initial impressions of the pilot program shared. Lastly, suggestions for future development are considered.

Since 2006, the Cascade Campus of Portland Community College (PCC Cascade) has seen dramatic increases in enrollment driven by demographic changes in the community as well as the recent economic downturn. Such increases in enrollment have been very positive for the growth and recognition of the college, yet at the same time, they have revealed new sets of challenges in managing a larger student body. The student services department of PCC Cascade became severely stressed during this phase of growth since the number of academic advisors and counselors was not able to match the pace of the increased demand for services.

One area of particular challenge has been new student orientation. At Portland Community College, there are two traditional modes of providing orientation services: in person and online. The increased enrollment has exposed limitations in both of these models that need to be addressed if the college is to effectively provide orientation services. With this in mind, a fresh approach to new student orientation, the START Lab, was developed at the PCC Cascade Campus as a pilot program. This model was designed to combine the best of the current in-person and online models in a way that appropriately addresses the needs of the increasing new student population.

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Theory and Research

The literature on adult education provides strong evidence for the presence of some form of orientation experience. Tinto's model of student departure offers fundamental principles on the effects that transition to college has on students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The basic premise of his model stated that college students need to go through a process of separation from their cultural and social background in order to effectively integrate with the new culture of the college experience. A student's ability to persist in a college or university is directly impacted by the positive experiences the student has during this process of transition and of interacting with the college culture. The more the student feels integrated into the college culture, the more the student will relate personal goals to the academic accomplishments he or she can realize in college. One could argue that based on this model, any process which facilitates integration, such as the orientation process, could only further facilitate a student's successful transition into the college culture, thereby increasing their chances for overall success in their college experience.

In reaction to Tinto's model, DeAnda's concept of dual socialization (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000) stated that some level of overlap must exist between the student's culture and the entering college culture in order for a successful transition to occur. Among the principles presented, she notes the importance of having available "cultural translators, mediators, and models" (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000, p. 134) that can assist in this process of dual socialization. Once again, an effective orientation program seems well suited and positioned to be able to provide such a function for incoming college students.

Jalomo's (1995) research on the effects of the college transition process on first-year Latino students also focused on the importance of cultural translators, mediators, and role models for students experiencing a significant cultural shift in the process of transitioning to college. Although his research was focused on the experience of Latino students, certain aspects are applicable to the general adult, lower-income population that comprise a large part of the new student body at PCC Cascade. Of particular relevance is the concept of cultural mediators. Cultural mediators are individuals who are part of the dominant culture, in this case the college culture, who can provide informal learning opportunities to those outside the culture, the incoming students. These cultural mediators, who may or may not have a similar cultural background as incoming students, can still have a positive impact on incoming students' ability to socialize into the new college culture.

Rendón's (1994) study on the role of validation and its impact on culturally diverse students transitioning into college also provides some evidence for the importance of orientation processes in new students' experience in community college. Rendón stressed that validation can have its strongest impact on students early in the college experience, and that the first week of classes during the semester or quarter as well as the first year in college are critical periods in which to validate new students. One could argue that the orientation process is well positioned to provide a validating environment during these critical times in the experience of

new college students.

Research is limited on the effectiveness of orientation programs in institutions of higher education, and particularly in community colleges (Hollins Jr., 2009). Within this limited research, most studies have shown that participation in orientation programs correlates with certain measures of student success, such as academic performance, involvement in extracurricular activities, development of strong connections with staff and faculty, and increased class participation and attendance (Gentry, Kuhnert, Johnson, & Cox, 2006). A study in the Virginia Community College System measured the effectiveness of several components of their orientation program, which includes a day-long information session and smaller group advising sessions (Hollins Jr., 2009). The results showed a positive correlation between student performance and retention and participation in these orientation programs.

Miller and Pope (2003) surveyed community college student affairs personnel to develop recommendations on integrating technology to orientation curricula. Their findings showed that the best ways for introducing technology to students in an orientation program were by providing students with e-mail accounts, emphasizing the importance of technology in the college culture, and engaging students in online activities such as virtual tours and information "treasure hunts." The researchers concluded that the study indicated a need for students to have some level of exposure to technology during their orientation process. However, given the wide range of populations, sizes, and resources available at community colleges, it is up to the internal culture of each institution to discern if and how they should allow this exposure to technology to take place.

Background

The need for a new approach to orientation at PCC was recognized in 2005, when the PCC admissions offices conducted a self-study of their operations (Bailey-Fournier, Gettmann, Jenkins, & Suárez, 2005). The study discovered that a large number of students were not progressing effectively through the admissions process. Of particular note was the transition of students from taking the college placement test to registering for classes. Of the students who applied for admission, only approximately 60% continued on to take the placement test. Of that group, 30% of the students who had applied for admission and completed the placement exam were not progressing effectively through the next steps to become registered students. By the time the yield rate of students was measured at the fourth week of registration, fewer than half of the original students who applied for admission were still registered.

It became obvious that many PCC applicants were not transitioning effectively in order to become registered students. Since students go through the orientation process during this transition phase, it became an area of interest and further examination for the admissions coordinators. It was found that the orientation models being used, though effective in some ways, were not able to properly meet the needs of new students, and the weaknesses of these models were having a

negative impact on student yield rates.

The Orientation Problem at PCC Cascade

Before 2005, all campuses in the PCC district required students to make an appointment to take a timed paper-and-pencil placement test. Tied to this appointment session was an in-person orientation presentation where students were informed of the steps they needed to follow in order to complete their admissions process. As the student population grew, it became less efficient to use this appointment system. The paper-and-pencil test was phased out in Fall 2005 for a computerized non-timed test which would allow the college to eliminate the need for appointments and create drop-in testing centers at all PCC campuses. This drop-in placement model paired with an open application system meant that students could more easily navigate through the initial steps of applying to PCC and completing the placement test.

However, an unintended consequence of this change was that the admissions offices were no longer able to provide orientation sessions at scheduled intervals to coincide with scheduled testing times. This led the college to create two modes of orientation for new students: in-person sessions and online orientation.

In-person Orientation: The Funnel Problem

The in-person sessions were designed to continue to provide students with the opportunity to meet with admissions personnel in person, obtain their orientation information, and ask questions or express concerns regarding their admissions process. These were scheduled at different times during the term in order to accommodate the varying schedules of prospective students. It was agreed that students who had tested in two or more developmental education courses would be highly encouraged by the testing center staff to conduct their orientation in person. After completing the placement test, students would sign up for an upcoming session. Assuming that students remembered their orientation appointment and that no sudden changes occurred in their schedule, the students would attend the in-person orientation session and continue with their admissions process.

Several factors made this process an inefficient model. First, many students did not remember their orientation appointments and missed their orientation time. Students had to schedule a new appointment and appear at a later session, which contributed to further frustration and anxiety as registration time commenced. Since students at PCC are not allowed to register for classes until they have completed an orientation, the delay in this process reduced students' chances of getting into their desired classes. Second, as the student population on campus grew in the mid-2000s, it became more challenging for admissions personnel to find adequate space on campus to schedule in-person orientation sessions at convenient times. Students who were able to complete their application and testing

process fairly quickly were held up waiting for an orientation session. These factors created a funnel problem and slowed down the admissions process, which led to a poor customer service experience and increased the potential of students dropping out from the admissions process.

Online Orientation: The Free-Fall problem

Online orientation was developed as a response to the challenges that emerged from a drop-in testing model and an appointment-based orientation model. With the input of student services personnel and faculty from different areas of the college, a website was designed that students could access at any time. Online orientation offered much flexibility, since it is virtually available twenty-four hours a day, so students who completed their placement test could find a time convenient for them to go online and complete their orientation. However, a new set of problems emerged that were not anticipated when the college made this option available.

First, many students coming to PCC do not have the means or the technical expertise to successfully complete the online orientation. An immediate barrier to successfully completing this process emerged if students didn't have access to a computer or didn't know how to use one. Second, it became difficult to track student progress upon completion of the placement test. Students were instructed to complete their orientation online, but there weren't any mechanisms in place to follow-up and make sure that students continued down the path to registration. Lastly, an efficient method was needed to verify that students completing online orientation were obtaining the proper information to move forward. Students who had completed online orientation would bring in questions that had been addressed in the online orientation to the admissions and advising offices because the information was not being retained. It is important to consider that students testing into pre-college level classes may not even have the level of reading comprehension necessary to fully understand the information they are expected to read in the online orientation. As a corollary to the in-person orientation funnel problem, the online orientation created a free-fall problem. Online orientation—the always-available bridge between placement testing and registration—became a muddled process in which students could easily become lost, frustrated, and ultimately defeated.

The Cascade START Lab: The Freeway Solution

Although the previously described orientation models have several challenges and limitations, they also contribute positive aspects to the orientation experience. In-person orientation allows students to meet with PCC staff, have their questions addressed directly, and receive hands-on assistance with class registration. On the other hand, the online orientation is flexible, allowing students to complete this process at a time that works for them. In devising a better approach to orientation,

it became critical to develop a system that combined the best aspects of these two models while avoiding their obvious challenges: a flexible (high-tech) yet personal (high-touch) approach. This led to the development of the Cascade START Lab.

The idea is fairly simple: have a computer lab on campus in the vicinity of the placement testing center that is open around the same hours that testing is offered. This lab is staffed with student services personnel and student assistants trained in the areas of admissions, basic advising, and registration. Once students complete their placement tests, they can drop in to this computer lab, watch a video of general orientation information at a computer station, and receive hands-on assistance with their questions. They can also get help with planning their first term of classes, setting up an online registration account, and signing up for classes they want to take. Within a couple of hours, students can finish their testing, orientation, and registration process with minimal frustration.

Potentially, students would be able to complete their admissions process—from application through becoming a registered student—in a matter of hours instead of days or weeks. By combining the high-tech flexibility of the online orientation model with the high-touch personal service of the in-person orientation model, the START Lab becomes an orientation experience that bridges the on-demand approach of the application and placement testing process to the online registration process that follows. The START Lab provides not only the means for accessing the technology, but also the hands-on help to assist students in learning how to use it. Thus the START Lab model can respond to the funnel problem of the in-person orientation and to the free-fall problem of the online orientation with a freeway solution. Students stay on the path from placement testing to registration with access to the tools they need and the help they require in a minimal amount of time and at a pace that works for them.

The name "START Lab" was chosen for two reasons: the word START represents that this is where new students get started with their process of becoming acclimated to the college culture. It is also an acronym that stands for "Student Training, Advising, Registration, and Troubleshooting," which encapsulated the services such an environment would provide to new students. With increased enrollment numbers at PCC in 2008 and 2009, the approach was given the opportunity to launch as a pilot program at the Cascade Campus. After six months of preparation and working to secure an adequate location, the Cascade START Lab launched in the summer of 2009. Since then, START Lab services have expanded to the other PCC campuses.

Assessing the START Lab

In order to critically determine whether or not the START Lab is to be a successful solution to the orientation problem at PCC, it is important to develop assessment protocols that can help inform its continuing evolution. Two types of questions were chosen in order to prepare the assessment: a modified version of the Reading Rating Sheets assessment technique and the Muddiest Point assessment technique (Angelo & Cross, 1993). The Reading Rating Sheet

was selected due to student's reaction to the information being offered in the orientation presentation, as well as the information being shared by the START Lab Staff. Since a student would not be doing a reading *per se*, the assessment was modified in order to obtain feedback on a student's overall impression of the information given during their time in the START Lab. To expedite the assessment process, the responses to questions were collected using a Likert-type five-point scale with which students could rate the quality of orientation information.

The Muddiest Point tool encompasses the last part of the assessment. The Muddiest Point assessment is a simple way of getting feedback on any specific information areas that were still unclear after completion of the orientation process. The information reveals specific areas which students do not understand so that they can be better addressed during the orientation process. One of the greatest advantages of this assessment tool is that it allows for fairly quick turnaround in the modification or addition of information to the orientation process. For example, if after a certain period of assessment it is evident that a particular topic in the orientation process is not clear, the START Lab staff can be more intentional about addressing this specific topic and making modifications as necessary to the information delivery method.

Initial Impressions

The START Lab pilot program at the PCC Cascade Campus was launched on July 6, 2009. In its first year, over 1,400 students came to the Cascade START lab to receive assistance in getting ready for their first term of college at PCC Cascade. Although a comprehensive analysis of the impact of START Lab services on students has not been conducted, some initial impressions can be shared.

An Introduction to Technology

Many of the students accessing services in the START Lab have had limited experience working with computers. Conversely, during the last decade, PCC has adopted more technological tools in order to increase the efficiency of certain processes and decrease costs. The START Lab has become a vehicle for introducing students with limited or no computer experience to the technological tools they will have to use at PCC. Learning how to access online services, setting up a student portal account, using online registration system, and navigating the PCC website have all become part of the student's learning experience in the START Lab. For students with limited computer experience, the START Lab provides a foundation of basic technology skills that could have an impact on their ability to succeed in college.

Building an On-going Connection

As time progressed, evidence has suggested that the START Lab is more than a place to get assistance when students first get started at PCC. Many students return to the START Lab in subsequent terms to reconnect with the place that helped them get started. In this sense, the START Lab is serving the function of a type of tutoring center, where instead of academic help students receive assistance with their student services needs.

In his study of Mexican Americans' freshman year college experiences, Attinasi (1989) argued that the orientation process helps students develop cognitive maps that assist them in finding their way through the new college environment. He suggested that for this reason, the orientation process should be extended, continuing through the duration of students' first year in school. This observation speaks to the idea that the orientation experience is not so much a one-time event as it is an on-going state. As students continue to navigate their way through PCC, they may need to refresh their knowledge of the skills and processes necessary to effectively transition from one term to the next.

Scalability

Possibly the most surprising finding of this study is realizing the ways in which the START Lab meets students' needs on campus that were not previously considered or anticipated. One example of this relates to financial aid. The START Lab had not been initially envisioned as a place where students could get help filling out their financial aid forms. Due to the compartmentalized nature of departments at PCC, financial aid has typically operated as a separate function of the admissions process. Staff members in admissions and advising offices would refer students to the financial aid office for questions, but there was not a physical space on campus where new and continuing students could get the necessary access to technology and hands-on help that many students would require in filling out their financial aid application. As the START Lab pilot visioning process evolved, it became obvious that financial aid application assistance should be provided. Thanks to some minor staff training and to the experience of student helpers in filling out their own financial aid forms, the START Lab has made financial aid application assistance one of its core services.

In light of findings published in May 2010 by the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, the ability to provide financial aid service is of critical importance. This study found that community college students present the highest level of financial need when it comes to paying for college, yet are statistically the least likely to apply for financial aid. The report cites seven challenges from prior studies that contribute to this issue, among them the fact that "Financial aid offices lack sufficient human and technology resources to provide students with information and one-on-one assistance" (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010, p. 3).

Additionally, Cabrera, Nora, and Castañeda's study on the impact of financial

aid on student persistence concludes that financial aid facilitates "the academic and social participation…of students in college, two factors that have been found to impact the student's decision to remain in college or to drop out." (1992, p. 590). Having a center such as the START Lab on campus can be a key resource for students lacking the skills and information necessary to be able to successfully complete the financial aid process. The evidence thus far on the impact the START Lab pilot program can have on helping students accomplish this is promising. According to PCC's Office of Institutional Advancement, 54% of incoming Fall 2009 Cascade Campus students who did not access the START Lab applied for financial aid. In contrast, 75% of incoming Fall 2009 students who did access the START Lab completed the financial aid application.

Future Considerations

External Assessment

Though the assessment process presented can be instrumental in shaping the delivery of services in the START Lab, it is also important to consider the long term effect that the START Lab may have on student experience. It would be valuable to learn if correlations exist between START Lab participation and student success measures such as persistence, retention, or academic performance. A database system has been developed whereby students check-in and provide basic identification and general information about the reason for their visit. This data could be used to conduct follow-up studies or track student progress over time.

Consistency of services

One area for improvement is the consistency of service. Lacking a dedicated space has begun to pose some challenges, especially as the START Lab becomes a more integral part of the college culture. From one term to the next, the hours of the START Lab have had to shift to accommodate other classes being offered in the same space. Not having consistent hours confuses students and can contribute to a frustrating experience. A dedicated space with a set number of hours that is consistent from term to term will assuage some of this frustration and will help the START Lab become a more prominent member of the campus culture.

Continued Scalability

Being able to provide financial aid application assistance was an unexpected yet welcome realization. As the START Lab concept continues to evolve, other potential areas for expansion emerge. PCC, like many other community colleges, provides multiple services to the community outside of credit courses for degree-

seeking students. Services such as the General Equivalency Degree (GED) exam and classes for non-native English speakers have their own separate orientation and admissions processes which can at times be confusing to students. The START Lab could potentially serve as a hub for all these various processes, simplifying the experience for students and streamlining many of the different ways in which students find their way into PCC.

Conclusion

The START Lab pilot program at the Cascade Campus has gotten off to a good start, and initial evaluation of the assessment data indicates that there is a high level of satisfaction with the services provided. Continuing to collect and critically analyze assessment data will help inform the future direction of the START Lab. The initial success of the START Lab at the Cascade Campus will serve as evidence to the PCC District that this is not only a viable orientation model, but a flexible and scalable program that can also provide critical services not previously available, such as hands-on assistance with the financial aid process. Hopefully, the START Lab model will one day become an integral part of the standard orientation services at PCC in order to better serve the needs of its dynamic and growing new student population.

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