# The Impact of a Program-Specific Orientation Course on Student Retention at a For-Profit, Post-Secondary Institution

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#### Abstract

The problem of this study was to determine whether or not a difference existed in student retention levels between 2009 and 2011 as kept by the Registrar's office of a proprietary institution located in north central Texas between program-specific orientation courses and general-population orientation courses at a postsecondary proprietary institution. A Mann-Whitney U test was used to examine retention across orientation types and identified a significant association between student persistence and type of freshman orientation seminar completed,  $\varphi = -0.43$ , p = .050. These findings concur with prior research, which indicate that major program or career focused orientation courses have a positive impact on retention. To enhance student retention at 4-year degree granting institutions, the researcher recommends a focused review and implementation of extended-length, program-specific orientation seminars.

With the rising number of private for-profit institutions in the postsecondary education market comes an increased competition for students. This competition creates a burden for public and proprietary institutions alike, which not only need to attract new students, but must also consider student retention and its impact on their fiscal solvency.

Proprietary institutes of higher education have been constantly adapting and expanding since the inception of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. This act, more commonly known as the GI Bill, ensured that millions of veterans returning from World War II began to focus on attaining a college degree rather than entering the limited job markets that were available at the time—job markets which were downsizing and retooling to accommodate non-wartime industries. The availability of funding for a college education via the GI Bill ensured that a record numbers of veterans enrolled into higher education institutions. By 1956, 7.8 million World War II veterans had used the GI Bill to improve their education ("Born of Controversy," 2009). This boom of servicemen who wanted to develop a better life for

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themselves and their families through pursuit of postsecondary education opened the door for the expansion of public and private institutions (Lee, 1996).

The 1970s and 1980s saw additional growth in the number of students attending proprietary schools. Tougher federal regulations designed to limit loan default levels at colleges were credited with a steep decline in the number of proprietary schools in the early 1990s. However, by 2004 the U.S. Department of Education was reporting a rebound in the overall number of for-profit institutions, and between 1996 and 2006, these schools gained 5% to 7% of total market share of all degrees conferred in higher education ("NEA Update," 2004; Planty, et al., 2009). In the decade beginning in 2000, a 37% increase in overall enrollment in degree granting postsecondary education institutions brought enrollments to 21 million students. Of these, over 12.5 million were 18- to 24-year-olds defined as part of the Millennial Generation (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). While this increase might be seen as sufficient to comfortably fill the classrooms and coffers of most postsecondary educational institutions in the U.S., the competition has been fierce, and the playing field is far from level.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), graduation rates for full-time students at Title IV public 4-year institutions for 2010 were 53.6%. While this may seem low, graduation rates for full-time students at Title IV proprietary institutions for the same period were only 32.3% (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012). Even before an institution can focus on graduation rates, however, it must ensure that students are retained through their first year (Dennis, 1998).

Early research on student retention reinforced the importance of student engagement on retention, and demonstrated that retention efforts matter the most during the first year of college (Tinto, 2005). But what exactly does retention entail? In an academic context, the term refers to an institution's ability to enable students to complete their first year and enroll to continue their education for a second year. Retention rates reported by NCES for Title IV public 4-year institutions in 2010 were 79.5%, while retention rates at Title IV proprietary instutions for the same period were only 52.3% (Knapp, et al., 2012).

Focusing on both graduation and retention rates reported by NCES makes it clear that over 20% of all student attrition at public institutions occurs within the first year, with the remaining 26% of losses occurring after that. At proprietary institutions, the numbers reflect more room for improvement. Proprietary institutions fail to retain over 47% of students taking first-year level coursework, with only 20% of total student attrition occurring after the first year (Knapp, et al., 2012). For proprietary colleges in particular, a concerted effort to enhance retention strategies may thus offer a greater possible financial benefit, without the need to expend additional effort and expense on attracting new students.

Why is retention so important? Because if an institution has any doubt about the benefits of a retention program, it need only focus on the potential financial losses incurred for each student who does not persist. Unfortunately, most colleges focus on the front-end cost of developing and implementing a retention strategy. According to Beal and Pascarella (1982), cost is identified by colleges as one of the primary impediments to progress when discussing implementation of a retention program. However, this argument is easily dismissed when weighed against the cost of losing even one student. The effects on an institution's potential revenue stream for each student who drops out after only one year can be staggering. According to the College Board report on Trends in College Pricing, the average published charges for tuition and fees at an in-state, 4-year public institution for 2012-2013 are \$8,655. Published

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average tuition and fees at for-profit institutions for 2012-2013 are \$15,172 (College Board, 2012). Based on these numbers, and making a conservative assumption that a student will average only four years at an institution, each student who does not persist beyond the first year represents average losses in tuition and fees of \$25,965 for public, and \$45,516 for proprietary institutions respectively.

Colleges have employed a variety of retention strategies in their attempts to mitigate student attrition. One of the most widely implemented and effective retention strategies used by colleges has been to focus on freshman orientation programs (Barefoot, 2004; Brawer, 1996). A freshman orientation program, sometimes referred to as an orientation course or seminar, can run in length from one week to as long as 2 full semesters depending on the school (Fidler & Fidler, 1991). These programs are designed to inform students about regulations, inculturate them into behavioral norms of the college, provide them with opportunities to meet informally with faculty, assist them in exploring their chosen major, help them to plan for their careers, and help them build the requisite academic skills required for success as college students (Barefoot, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). With a retention strategy so frequently employed, it is no wonder that, according to Cuseo (1997), "the freshman orientation course has been the most frequently researched and empirically well-documented course in the history of American higher education" (p. 3). While much research has been conducted regarding orientation programs at the 4-year public university and private college level, and that research has been extended to the community college level, related research at proprietary institutions is almost non-existent. None exists focusing specifically on proprietary instutions related to program-specific orientation courses and their levels of success.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not a difference existed in student retention and academic performance levels between or among program-specific orientation courses and general-population orientation courses at a postsecondary proprietary institution. This study specifically examined retention and academic performance data as kept by the Registrar's office of a proprietary college located in north central Texas.

### Significance of the Study

The impact of an effective student retention program for an institution is undeniable. Failure to motivate students and provide a safe, nurturing environment with a clearly defined path to graduation may lead to a decrease in both student retention and persistence. The revenue each student generates for a campus is directly related to the institution's ability to retain the student. But what exactly is the difference between retention and persistence? Ellis-O'Quinn (2011) observes that "neither the 4-year or 2-year sector of higher education has offered a global definition of these terms" (p. 19). Berger, Ramirez, and Lyons (2012) attempt to clarify these terms in the second edition of *College Student Retention*. According to the authors, persistence refers to a student's desire, and the subsequent actions that he or she takes, to stay within the system of higher education, from the initial entry year through to degree completion. They go on

to describe retention as "the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through to graduation" (p. 12). Based on these definitions, persistence can be qualified as an example of intrinsic motivation, internal to the student, whereas retention is external to the student: a function of the educational institutions attempts to keep the student engaged and continually enrolled.

Barefoot first classified orientation types in the 1991 National Survey of Freshman Seminar Programs, and further clarified the categories in her subsequent doctoral dissertation (as cited in Padgett & Keup, 2011). Her classification of orientation seminars has been accepted as the standard, and identifies five orientation seminar types: "extended orientation, academic orientation with uniform content across sections, academic orientation covering various topics, basic study skills, and pre-professional or discipline-linked" (Padgett & Keup, 2011, p. 34).

Extended orientation courses tend to focus on topics related to successful integration into college life. Content can include an introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and an introduction to student development issues (Padgett & Keup, 2011). Cuseo (1997) expressed support for the use of extended orientation based on his own work "given the empirical research indicating greater retentionenhancing effects of longer orientation interventions" (p. 14). Tinto (1999) agreed, and pushed to integrate the freshman seminar and the concepts covered in the course into the entire first year as a learning community. Academic orientation seminars with equivalent content across sections tend to focus primarily on an academic theme or discipline, with all sections taught with uniform content in the same fashion (Padgett & Keup, 2011). Academic orientation seminars covering various topics are identical to the uniform content model, except that the content varies from section to section based on the skills and academic background of the instructor. Basic study skills-based orientation seminars focus on remediation, specifically in the areas of writing, testtaking strategies and reading techniques (Padgett & Keup, 2011). Pre-professional or disciplinelinked orientation seminars are designed to group students by discipline or profession, with the intent to prepare students for career entry. Cuseo supports the use of discipline-linked orientation seminars. He asserts that they increase the likelihood that students will view freshman orientation as relevant because students will encounter topics related to their future needs and plans-all accomplished while engaging with other students who share similar backgrounds and goals.

The positive impact of freshman orientation seminars at the public and private universities and community colleges related to student performance and retention has been highly studied (Barefoot, 1993). While retention methods such as first-year orientation seminars have been the subject of many well-documented studies at 4-year public institutions (Barefoot,2004; Cuseo, 1997; Fidler & Fidler, 1991), only more recent studies have expanded the focus to community colleges (Padgett & Keup, 2011), with a notable lack of research specifically related to proprietary institutions (Clark, 2012). Part of the problem in studying the topic is that when proprietary institutions have been allowed to participate in studies, they are often misidentified. Peltier, Laden, and Matranga (1999, p.364) found that they are sometimes categorized as "private," and other times simply described as "alternative" types of institutions. These researchers further suggest that research focusing specifically on these types of schools should be conducted.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher investigated the following research questions:

- 1. What percentage of entering freshmen were retained to their third quarter for AY 2009, AY 2010, and AY 2011 at a selected proprietary institution by participation in general-population or program-specific freshman orientation seminar?
- 2. Does a difference exist in the retention of entering freshmen for AY 2009, AY 2010, and AY 2011 at a selected proprietary institution between those participating in a general-population freshman orientation seminar and those participating in a program-specific freshman orientation seminar?

#### Hypotheses

The following null and alternate research hypotheses were tested at the .05 level for significance to support examination of research question 2:

- Ho. No difference exists in the retention of entering freshmen for AY 2009, AY 2010, and AY 2011 at a selected proprietary institution between those participating in a general-population freshman orientation seminar and those participating in a program-specific freshman orientation seminar.
- Ha. A difference exists in the retention of entering freshmen for AY 2009, AY 2010, and AY 2011 at a selected proprietary institution between those participating in a general-population freshman orientation seminar and those participating in a program-specific freshman orientation seminar.

### **Method of Procedure**

This study sought to investigate the potential impact of a mandatory, program-specific freshman orientation course on the retention and academic success of students attending proprietary schools. The method of procedure includes selection of the sample, procedures for collection of data, and treatment of the data.

#### **Selection of the Sample**

A list of full-time students for AY 2009, AY 2010, and AY 2011 was requested from the Registrar's office of a proprietary institution located in North Central Texas. Students were categorized by the Registrar's office based on their attendance in either a program-specific college orientation course, or a general-population college orientation course. Student data were subcategorized based on retention and academic performance.

The proprietary institution studied is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) as a Level II institution; granting associate's and bachelor's level degrees in the applied arts. Major program areas include Advertising Design, Culinary Arts, Digital Film and Video Production, Fashion Design, Fashion Retail Marketing, Graphic Design, Interior Design, Media Arts and Animation, Photography, and Web Design and Interactive Media (Art Institutes, 2012). Beginning in 2009, these programs began transitioning from general-population freshman orientation courses to freshman orientation courses explicitly designed to focus on the career specializations of the students.

Mann-Whitney U tests were used to determine if students participating in a programspecific freshman orientation seminar persist at a higher rate and attain a higher GPA when moving from their second to third quarter. The grouping variable for this study was attendance in an orientation course, either general-population or program-specific. The test variables included students' GPA scores and persistence level.

### Limitations

The following limitations applied to this study:

- 1. The study was limited to students at a single institution, and as such may be limited in generalizability.
- 2. The researcher used only the available data as maintained in official student records by the Registrar's office at the proprietary institution studied.

#### Delimitations

The researcher applied the following delimitations to this study:

- 1. Only students who attended a single proprietary postsecondary institution between AY 2009 and AY 2011 were included in the study.
- 2. Only students who completed a college orientation course while attending the identified proprietary institution were included in the study.
- 3. Only student retention rates up to the end of the third quarter were included in the study.

#### **Research Question 1**

The first research question was: "What percentage of entering freshmen were retained to their third quarter for AY 2009, AY 2010, and AY 2011 at a selected proprietary institution by participation in general-population or program-specific freshman orientation seminar?" The data set included 2,052 students. Overall student retention was 64.6%. Students who participated in a general-population freshman orientation seminar exhibited a persistence rate of 60.8%, while students who participated in a program-specific freshman orientation seminar exhibited a substantially higher persistence rate of 65.8%.

Table 1 shows the breakout of the population by gender related to participation in either general-population or program-specific orientation courses. Males comprised 46% of the population studied; females comprised 54%. While almost 77% of all students in the study participated in some form of program-specific orientation seminar, a higher percentage of all participants in the general population orientation seminars were male (51.7%).

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for participation in orientation type across eight identified racial types. The ethnic makeup of the data collected indicates a broad spectrum of participants. These include categories for American Indian (AM); Asian (AS); Black (BL); Hispanic (HI); students who identify with multiple ethnic groups (MU); Pacific Islanders (PI), students who chose to remain unidentified (UN), and White (WH).

### Table 1

### Orientation Participation by Gender

	Male	Female	<u>N</u>
General-population Orientation	245	228	473
Program-specific Orientation	700	879	1579
Total	1327	1107	2052

### Table 2

### Orientation Participation by Race

	<u>AM</u>	AS	<u>BL</u>	<u>HI</u>	<u>MU</u>	<u>PI</u>	<u>UN</u>	<u>WH</u>	<u>N</u>	
General-population	3	17	72	101	1	0	62	217	473	
Program-Specific	23	42	267	299	23	5	255	665	1579	
Total	26	59	339	400	24	5	317	882	2052	

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question was: "Does a difference exist in the retention of entering freshmen for AY 2009, AY 2010, and AY 2011 at a selected proprietary institution between those participating in a general-population freshman orientation seminar and those participating in a program-specific freshman orientation seminar?" This question is directly related to the null and alternate hypotheses. The null hypothesis states, "No difference exists in the retention of entering freshmen for AY 2009, AY 2010, and AY 2011 at a selected proprietary institution between those participating in a general-population freshman orientation seminar and those participating in a general-population freshman orientation seminar and those participating in a general-population freshman orientation seminar and those participating in a general-population seminar." Table 3 provides the retention demographics for the general-population and program-specific orientations.

#### Table 3

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# Retention Rates by Orientation Type

	<u>Retained</u>	Withdrew	<u>N</u>	
General-population Orientation	288	185	473	
Program-specific Orientation	1039	540	1579	
Total	1327	725	2052	

A Chi-square test for association was conducted to address Research Question 2 and sought to determine if there was an association or independence between the two dichotomous variables. These variables were identified as orientation type (program-specific orientation versus general-population orientation), and retention through the third quarter (yes or no). The assumptions of the Chi-square test for association regarding sampling and distribution were confirmed. Results are provided in Table 4 and Table 5.

### Table 4

		<u>Retained</u>	Withdrew	<u>N</u>	
General-population	Count	288.0	185.0	473.0	
	Expected Count	305.9	167.1	473.0	
	% within orient_type	60.9	39.1	100.0	
	% within Persist	21.7	25.5	23.1	
	% of Total	14.0	9.0	23.1	
Program-specific	Count	1039.0	540.0	1579.0	
	Expected Count	1021.1	557.9	1579.0	
	% within orient_type	65.8	34.2	100.0	
	% within Persist	78.3	74.5	76.9	
	% of Total	50.6	26.3	76.9	
<u>Total</u>	Count	1327.0	725.0	2052.0	
	Expected Count	1327.0	725.0	2052.0	
	% within orient_type	64.7	35.3	100.0	
	% within Persist	100.0	100.0	100.0	
	% of Total	64.7	35.3	100.0	

### Orientation Type - Retention Cross Tabulation

According to Lund and Lund (2013), when calculating a cross tabulation for the Chi-Square test of association, there is a choice over which use of results to select the Pearson Chi-Square or the Fisher's Exact Test. However, they suggest using Fisher's Exact Test only when one or more expected cell frequencies is less than five. As established earlier, all cell frequencies were well above five due to the large sample size, so Fisher's Exact Test was inappropriate for this situation. Based on the analysis of the data provided by the Chi-square test for association, there was a statistically significant association between orientation type and student retention,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.845$ , p = .050.

Table 5

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	<u>df</u>	Asymp. Sig.	Exact Sig.	Exact Sig.	
			(2-sided)	(2-sided)	(1-sided)	
Pearson Chi-Square	3.845 <sup>a</sup>	1	.050			
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>		1	.057			
Likelihood Ratio		1	.051			
Fisher's Exact Test				.055	.029	
Linear-by-Linear Assoc.		1	.050			
N of Valid Cases	2052					

Note –

*a.* 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 167.12. *b.* Computed only for a 2x2 table.

In order to confirm the measure of the effect size given by the Pearson Chi-Square, Phi ( $\phi$ ) and Cramer's V measures were conducted and are reported in Table 6. Phi was selected as the most suitable because it requires two dichotomous variables. The range of output from Phi is from -1 to +1, and the output is interpreted in the same manner as a correlation.

#### Table 6

### Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.	
Nominal by Nominal	Phi (φ)	043	.050	
	Cramer's V	.043	.050	
N of Valid Cases		2052		

There was a statistically significant association between student persistence and type of freshman orientation seminar completed,  $\varphi = -0.43$ , p = .050. Therefore, Ho1, stating that there was no difference in persistence rates between students participating in general-population and program-specific orientation seminars, was rejected.

The results of both the Mann-Whitney U test, and the Chi-square test for association both confirm that student retention levels based on the type of orientation seminar vary greatly. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to identify academic performance across orientation types as significantly different (p = .001). Accordingly, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis Ho. Differences exist in student retention levels based on type of orientation.

### **Implications for Action**

Based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that the use of a quarter-long, programspecific orientation course at the proprietary institution being studied had a more positive impact on student retention than the general-population orientation course. These findings concur with those from prior research (Beran, 1996; Cuseo, 1997; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Porter & Swing, 2006; Tucker, 1999), which indicate that major program or career focused orientation courses – those that give students a clear understanding of the industry they have chosen to enter as well as a defined path to their intended career goals – have a positive impact on both student GPA scores and retention. Unfortunately, data indicate that currently only 4.4% of all 4-year institutions employ this type of freshman orientation course (Padgett & Keup, 2011). To help increase student retention and GPA scores at 4-year institutions, the researcher recommends a focused review and implementation of program-specific orientation courses.

#### Recommendations

Several recommendations for further research arose from the limitations found in this study, which was based on data extracted from the student information system at a single proprietary institution. While the results are invaluable to the researcher, data may not be

representative of the student populations of other schools. A similar study should be conducted at other proprietary institutions that conduct career focused freshman orientation courses.

### Further Research to Address Other Schools within the System of Schools

This institution is part of a large system of for-profit, postsecondary schools which all have similar student populations, and a similar educational mission. Program offerings within this system focus exclusively on applied art and design. A similar study should be expanded to include other schools within this system, either at the state, regional, or national (system-wide) level.

### Further Research to Address Other Proprietary Institutions with Different Student **Populations or Educational Missions**

As stated previously, the institution being studied maintains a narrow focus in terms of degree offerings. Because of the number and variety of proprietary institutions that have established themselves in the past few decades, and the variety of degrees a student may earn at these institutions, the same study may yield different results at another proprietary institution. This would be due to a more varied student population or different institutional mission.

## Further Research to See if a Difference Exists Between or Among the Different Program-**Specific Courses Taught at the Institution Studied**

This study categorized freshman orientation courses based on the student populations in attendance: either general-population based courses (students from all programs of study) or program-specific courses (students segregated into career focused groups). At the institution being reviewed, there was only one general-population course offered, but 10 program-specific courses based on the different degrees offered. This study should be replicated to include a review of retention and GPA score based on the different program-specific courses taught at the institution to see if a difference exists.

### **Summary**

While the literature has demonstrated that there are a variety of ways to address student retention, as yet no magic bullet has been found. Even within the types of programs available with the intended purpose of engaging and integrating students into both the social and academic environments found on every college campus, there is no agreement as to the best method to be used. Each institution must review the methods available and make an informed decision on which to implement on its campus based on its stated academic mission and student population. For if the student retention methods employed do not actively engage the students in question, they will disengage in search of something else that meets their perceived needs. As Barefoot (2004) notes, "contemporary American college students are not known for their 'product loyalty.' They are on a continual search for the 'best deal' or 'greener pastures,' and higher education institutions are happy to oblige" (p. 12).

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