

## A Comparison Study of Enrollees and Non-Enrollees in an Orientation Course at a Two-Year College

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*This article provides an overview of a voluntary first-year student orientation course at a public two-year college, and the effectiveness of this course in improving on-campus degree progress, persistence, and academic achievement. Although subsequent grade point averages were not significantly higher for those enrolled in a first-year course compared to those who were not, significant positive differences were found in long-term retention rates. In addition, there was a positive correlation between student grades in FCS 101 and subsequent grade point average, thus legitimizing the grading process of the student success course. These findings support the need for first-year student transitional programming and the ability of orientation courses to positively correlate to academic achievement.*

Community and junior colleges have a long history of providing diverse educational opportunities for students, ranging from traditional academic programs geared toward transfer opportunities, to advanced occupational and vocational education certificates and degrees. The two-year college has also been seen as a leader in accommodating at-risk and non-traditional student populations, and, as a result, now enrolls approximately half of all students in higher education (Altbach & Lewis, 1995; Brubacher, 1982; Cohen & Brawer, 1982).

Many at-risk students enrolled in two-year colleges have been directed into developmental or remedial classes designed to prepare them for academic success (Deegan & Tillery, 1985). Bonham (1993) found that lack of student success in these remedial courses has been correlated with student drop-out. Therefore, if an institution does not provide support necessary for remediation and development, it is at risk of losing enrollment benefits and can be criticized for its inability to fulfill its obligation to community education.

Another group of students who benefit from remediation and developmental courses are adults entering or returning to postsecondary education for re-training and formal education. These individuals often report high anxiety and apprehension about returning to school, a risk factor commonly understood to affect many traditional students who view their first college experiences and the choices they encounter as overwhelming (Stupka, 1986).

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While low-income students have increasingly found ways to enroll in college, there has been a general decline of students from middle-income families (McPherson & Schapiro, 1994). A large percentage of low-income students matriculate through the community college system, and lack of success in college has been correlated with family background (Riehl, 1994). In addition, Cuseo (1991) found that first-year students are more likely to drop out of college than are upper-level students. A study by the Minnesota House of Representatives (1991) indicates that 55% of public college students in their state drop out before the end of their second year. Thus, two-year institutions with significant numbers of low-income and first-time students must be particularly mindful of the quality of remediation made available to students.

Persistence to degree or program completion has also been a problem for community colleges. These institutions, which typically enroll ethnically and chronologically diverse student populations, have begun to implement and refine academic success courses to combat these persistence problems (Belcher, 1987).

Nearly two-thirds of all postsecondary educational institutions have recognized a need for an introductory course aimed at first-year student success (Gardner & Jewler, 1992). These freshman orientation courses typically provide instruction in a variety of areas applicable to enhancing student success on campus, including topics such as time management, test-taking success, student-faculty relationships, study skills, career counseling, and wellness (Gardner & Jewler). Thus, this course would seem to be particularly helpful for two-year colleges that enroll large numbers of diverse and at-risk students.

Successful completion of student success courses has been linked to higher grade point averages and lower dropout rates (DeFrain & Gould, 1987; Starke, 1989; Stupka, 1993). It is commonplace for a student success course to be offered in addition to a new student orientation program. This provides a mechanism to further aid in the acculturation to the new environment as well as to prevent dropout behaviors (LaVoy, 1986).

These courses typically involve one or two distinct themes: remediation and/or personal and academic success. Courses focused on remediation of basic skills essential for future academic success may include tutoring in math, science, interpersonal communications, reading, and/or English composition. As Upcraft and Gardner (1989) have noted, voluntary courses centered on personal and academic success tend to focus on knowledge of campus services, counseling, mentoring, wellness, academic support programs, time management, test taking, note taking skills, and faculty relationships.

Although Fidler (1987) found no difference in academic motivation between students who voluntarily enrolled in student success courses and those who did not, completion rates of students in college were higher for enrolled students (Jones, 1984; Belcher, 1987; Starke, 1989). Enrollment in student success courses is often voluntary; however, it is commonly encouraged by academic advisors during the advisement process. In some instances, enrollment may be mandatory based on placement test results.

### Research Method

#### The Institution

The current study was conducted at Floyd College, a public two-year academic

transfer college in Rome, Georgia. The college maintains an enrollment of approximately 3,000 students, of which approximately 2,000 are first-year college students. The institution offers an associate's degree designed to provide the foundation for academic transfer to a four-year institution. The student body is 70% female and 90% caucasian. Approximately one-third of all students are required to enroll in a learning support course as a result of low scores on placement exams.

The Floyd College faculty is evenly divided between full-time ( $n=74$ ) and part-time personnel ( $n=77$ ), and the majority of the part-time faculty members are assigned to late afternoon and evening classes. The transfer program, designed to prepare students to transfer to four-year institutions upon graduation, is the most popular academic track. Within this transfer degree option, the most common major is business administration, followed closely by teacher education and psychology.

The second most common selection is the career program track, and the most popular career programs at Floyd College include nursing, human services, and the physical therapy assistant programs. The remaining students are enrolled in certification initiatives, personal development courses, or professional enrichment programs.

#### Procedure

The purpose for conducting the current study was to determine the success of a freshman orientation course based on course exit variables including subsequent grade point average, dropout rate, post-course credit hours earned, and the relationship between completion of the course and subsequent grade point average. For data collection purposes, the study utilized a case study methodology, relying on institutional data from Floyd College in Rome, Georgia, and the freshman orientation course offered on that campus — Floyd College Studies 101 (FCS 101). The voluntary course was designed to provide incoming students with strategies for developing personal, academic, and career-directed goals.

This study specifically attempted to determine (a) whether there was a significant difference between the subsequent grade point averages of those who enrolled in the course and those who did not; (b) whether there was a significant difference between the dropout rates of those who enrolled in the course and those who did not; and (c) whether there was a positive correlation between subsequent academic success and student grade achievement in FCS 101.

#### Participants

The subjects for this study were all first-year students who had not previously enrolled in college prior to their enrollment for the fall 1992 quarter. The treatment group included all students who voluntarily enrolled in FCS 101 and who received a passing grade for the course ( $n=48$ ). The control group was comprised of an identical number of students ( $n=48$ ) who matched as closely as possible the demographic and scholastic characteristics of the treatment group, but who did not enroll in FCS 101. The match-pair design was completed using information on gender, race, age, date of initial matriculation, SAT scores, and certified placement scores. All data were taken from the

management information system utilized by Floyd College.

Students who enrolled in FCS 101 were an average of 26 years old, primarily white (94%) and female (81%), and earned an average SAT score of 797. The majority of those enrolled had never been married (62%), while 27% were married at the time of their enrollment and 10% were divorced. No one in the treatment group reported holding veteran status.

#### Results

##### Subsequent Academic Success

The group cumulative grade point averages (from fall 1992 quarter through spring 1995) for those taking the class (treatment group) and those not taking the class (control group) were computed. The treatment group earned a mean GPA of 2.684 (on a 4.0 scale), while the control group earned an average GPA of 2.395. Although the treatment group had a slightly higher GPA, no significant difference was found between the two groups when applying an analysis of variance (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

##### Comparison of Grade Point Averages by Analysis of Variance

Source	df	E	SS	Mean Score
Between groups	1	2.450	2.001	2.001
Within groups	94		76.760	

Note. FCS 101  $M=2.684$ ,  $SD=0.824$ . Control  $M=2.395$ ,  $SD=0.959$ ;  $\chi=.05$ ,  $p, 3.920$ .

##### Dropout Rate Differences

The dropout rate was defined as lacking continuous enrollment in quarters during the subsequent 3-year period beyond initial enrollment. The mean number of quarters attended by treatment group students beyond initial enrollment was 6.229, and the control group students enrolled for an average of 4.708 quarters. Using an analysis of variance, a significant difference was found between the two enrollment pattern means with 95% confidence (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

## Comparison of Dropout Rates by Analysis of Variance

Source	df	E	SS	Mean Score
Between groups	1	8.411*	55.510	55.510
Within groups	94		620.396	6.600

Note. FCS 101  $M=6.299$ ,  $SD=2.527$ . Control  $M=4.708$ ,  $SD=2.557$ ;  $p<3.920$ .

## Grade Correlation

To determine the extent of a relationship between academic success (GPA) and course grade in FCS, a Pearson Product Moment Correlation was utilized. The students' grades from FCS 101, on a standard 4-point scale, were correlated with cumulative GPAs from the fall quarter 1992 through the spring quarter of 1995, extracting FCS 101 from the student's overall GPA achievement. With a probability level of .05, the Pearson  $r$  was computed to be 0.441, suggesting a moderate positive linear relationship between the two factors.

## Discussion

Entering the college environment has presented students with a variety of challenges and opportunities which have translated into potential obstacles to success in their college experiences. New students have been more likely to discontinue their college pursuits than their upperclass counterparts (Cuseo, 1991). For years, college administrators have wrestled with retention problems, and they have tried numerous methods designed to improve student persistence. Student success courses, designed to equip students with the skills needed to face the personal and academic challenges of college life, have become one of the more popular tools in addressing retention and academic success issues.

This study indicates that the student success course at Floyd College has achieved a level of success in meeting its goals. While the study did not demonstrate a significant difference on subsequent grade point averages by students taking the course, it did indicate a significant positive impact on retention rates of those who successfully completed the class. In addition, a significant correlation was found between student grade achievement in FCS 101 and overall student GPA, a finding which legitimizes the grading process of FCS 101.

The primary limitation of this study is the small number and percentage of students who participated in the class. Even so, these findings demonstrate the effectiveness of this course in improving student retention across several semesters, which suggests that the students likely benefited from the class in terms of completing their academic goals. Additional research on other two-year campuses would be helpful in determining the level of success of each first-year-student course at a two-year college.

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## ARTICLE

### Orientation From a Distance: Connecting New Students to Campus by Utilizing Video Conferencing

Therese Lask

*Video conferencing offers a new format for orienting out-of-state students and their family members. Institutions interested in utilizing video conferencing for orientation should consider several factors prior to implementation, including the demographics of the distance students, resources available at the distance site, level of inability for families to come to campus, and resources available for the program. The University of Northern Colorado has initiated such a program and offers a case example for usage of this creative, unique approach to connecting new students and their families to campus.*

The underlying purpose of university orientation programs is to "connect" students to the college experience in a way that will impact their future academic success (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989). Technology offers a new way to approach this goal by utilizing video conferencing for those students located long distances from campus.

Traditional orientation programs are implemented in a variety of formats. Many institutions offer one-day to three-day orientation programs during the summer, while other colleges schedule freshmen to attend orientation programs a week before the semester begins (Smith & Brackin, 1993). Orientation attendance is mandatory at some colleges and simply recommended at others (Strumpf & Sharer, 1993). While these traditional methods of orientation may be adequate for many students, they are not reasonable options for others. Particularly, students who live far away from campus may not be able to attend a summer orientation, and the distance makes it unlikely that parents will attend the program. While it is obviously more desirable to bring students and their parents to campus, video conferencing provides a creative, cost-effective way to initiate a positive campus experience with new students and their families. Of particular note is the addition of parents who might otherwise be excluded since "long before and after attachments are made to new classmates, friends, roommates, faculty, and staff, students rely on family/extended family members for feedback, reassurance, and guidance" (Austin, 1993, p. 97). Clearly, parents are important partners in retention of students during the first year experience.

#### A Case Example

The University of Northern Colorado (UNC) is predominately a regional college.

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