The Effect of New Student Orientations on the Retention of Online Students

Amy Stoebe
Chatham University
A.Stoebe@chatham.edu

Robin Grebing
Maryville University
rgrebing@maryville.edu.

Abstract

While there is a lack consensus as to whether orientations for online students should be completed on campus or online, research suggests that having an in-depth orientation and onboarding process increases the academic preparedness of online students and, consequently, improves retention. This action research study attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of an in-depth, virtual, student orientation on the retention and academic preparedness of online students at a small, private college. There was an increase of 7% in the retention rate from the fall to spring in the year the institution implemented the online orientation. Additionally, the results indicate students felt more academically prepared, a finding also supported by the results of a faculty survey. While the number in the sample was small, the results are promising and signal a need for additional research on the link between a formal orientation, retention, and academic preparedness for online students.

Introduction

Most online students would be considered nontraditional. They often have families, maintain full-time employment, and are usually, but not always, over the age of 23 (Van Hunnick, 2015). Online students are not often academically or technologically prepared to begin their programs. They often struggle with balancing the demands of work, college, and their personal lives. These struggles can increase the likelihood of attrition (Turner & Thompson, 2014), which is higher for online students than for students enrolled in traditional classes (Ali & Smith, 2015). Research regarding online education suggests that providing these students with an in-depth orientation process presents them with the academic and technical support needed to be successful during their studies. A thorough orientation also teaches students the time management skills needed to balance the competing demands of school, work, and their personal lives (Swett, 2016).

The online students of a small liberal arts university in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania served as the participants for this study. The dissertation will refer to the university under the pseudonym Williams Pitt University (WPU). While the online graduate programs showed retention rates as high as 95% for some programs, the retention rate of WPU's online undergraduate programs from 2006-2017 was 43% (Zhang, 2016). This result falls well below the national average of 60% (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Administrators at WPU realized a great deal of attrition in the online programs occurred during or immediately following a student's first semester. In its initial orientation program for online students, WPU utilized an optional, synchronous, virtual classroom orientation from 2006 through 2017. The orientation was open for three days, approximately one week prior to the start of a semester. The content mainly focused on teaching students how to use the online classroom.

The University launched a new orientation for the 2018-2019 academic year consisting of a mandatory, asynchronous virtual classroom experience. The new orientation offered an expanded window for participation by opening approximately one month prior to the start of semester. While students still learn how to use the online classroom, the orientation also discusses student support services, time management, and technology resources. In the new orientation, students can access and view videos and documents at their own pace. This action research study evaluated recent changes to the orientation process and how those changes impacted the academic preparedness and first semester retention of online students at WPU.

Literature Review

Online students are one of the fastest growing populations in the American college system (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). Approximately 53% of college students nationwide are completing at least a portion of their degrees online. An estimated 66% of online students are attending public universities, and 56% of this population lives in the same state as the school they are attending (Friedman, 2018). While a small percentage of students enrolled in online classes are traditional students, a vast majority are working adults (Van Hunnick, 2015). Students enrolled in fully online programs usually attend part-time due to the demands of full-time employment (Colorado & Eberle, 2010). Research suggests that academic preparedness plays a key role in a student's desire to persist in his or her current program. Similarly, adequate preparation for college expectations increases the likelihood a student will experience academic success (Camara, 2013; Hepworth, Littlepage, & Hancock, 2018). Research has found students often credit their onboarding experience with their level of academic preparedness (Hepworth, et al., 2018). Swett (2016) argued that online students need an onboarding process which provides content similar to an orientation for traditional students. This population needs access to academic support, technical support, and opportunities to become an engaged member of the campus community. Providing an overview of time management also helps this population succeed.

Retention Issues for Online Students

Rovai (2003) conducted the first documented study concerning retention rates of online students. The study used aspects of Tinto's (1975) retention theory and Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model theory as lenses for understanding the isolation online students often feel. Because this population frequently feels they are alone with no support, Rovai (2003) argued for onboarding processes designed to counter this feeling. When online students feel more connected to an institution and support resources, they are more likely to succeed.

When Rovai's (2003) study was conducted, online programs were only beginning to emerge. Little was known at that time about providing resources, such as an onboarding experience, to help these students be successful. Rovai (2003) suggested that an in-person orientation process would help prepare online students for their academic journeys, but there has been little research conducted to determine if other methods such as virtual orientation would prove to be beneficial as well.

The Benefits of College Orientations

A successful orientation provides an overview of the institutional resources that exist to help online students achieve their academic goals (Robichaud, 2016). For example, an orientation should introduce students to campus support services and demonstrate how to access them remotely. The orientation should also show students how they can be an active member of their campus, even if they cannot physically be present on that campus (Swett, 2016). Studies suggest that students are more successful after having completed an orientation that sets the proper expectations for success in their chosen program (Karp & Bork, 2012; Robichaud, 2016; Scagnoli, 2001).

In-person Orientations

In-person orientations can provide students with the training needed to be successful in the classroom. Safford and Stinton (2016) argue that an in-person orientation offers the best means of introducing students to campus resources. This study cited lack of technical knowledge as the number one reason for attrition of online students, and the authors asserted students cannot effectively learn the technological skills needed to succeed in an online program without a face-to-face orientation. Research suggests that in-person orientations can provide the requisite technical training if the orientation provides students opportunities to practice using the technology associated with the online program. Students need to familiarize themselves with the college's learning management system and virtual student resources before the start of classes to increase their chances of success (Anderton, 2006; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012).

This type of orientation does have limitations, however. Online students often enroll in an online program due to the need for flexibility, which physical orientations cannot provide. Most nontraditional students have personal and work-related obligations that prevent them from attending physical classes. This presents a challenge for online students to attend an in-person orientation (Schudde, 2016).

Regardless of the aforementioned constraints, some colleges have experienced success conducting virtual orientations in a traditional classroom. Gilmore and Lyons (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study that evaluated the effect of such a program. The study looked at orientation and retention results for 179 new, online RN-BSN students at a small private college. The first group of 102 students attended a four-hour orientation, consisting almost entirely of virtual interactions. Students were then surveyed to discover if they felt well-prepared to begin their program. Only 77.6% agreed the orientation prepared them well for their program. The most frequently cited weakness was the lack of technical training. The second orientation was eight hours long, face-to-face, and consisted of more personal interactions with the students. This group consisted of 47 students. Due to the smaller sample size, the same orientation process was repeated with the next RN-BSN cohort, consisting of 30 students. These cohorts were provided a post-orientation survey. The results of the survey showed 98.2% of the students who received the longer, more personalized orientation felt well-prepared to begin their program. The researchers also tracked the retention rates of all three cohorts and noted a retention rate increase from 76% to 98% when the college augmented the personal interactions involved in the orientation (Gilmore & Lyons, 2012).

Not all studies related to in-person orientations provide strong evidence of this model's success. Lieberman (2017), conducted a study of new online MBA students at the Fox School of business. The researcher surveyed students who completed an online orientation compared to those who attended an in-person orientation. While students who attended the in-person orientation acknowledged feeling a greater sense of community compared to those who attended the online orientation, the students in both groups felt the orientation prepared them well for beginning their course. The students who completed the online orientation, however, expressed their work schedules would never have allowed them to complete an in person orientation. Expressly, the need for flexibility for student populations was the motivation behind the university offering both in-person and online orientations (Lieberman, 2017).

While in person orientation may be beneficial in building a stronger connection to the university, this method cannot be successful if the student cannot attend the orientation program. Adult students often need the flexibility to complete on their own time rather than having a specific date and time to attend an event on campus. This lack of flexibility is often a deterrent for students when looking for an online program to attend (Schudde, 2016; Swett, 2016).

Virtual Student Orientations

Bean and Metzner (1985) argued the need for colleges and universities to improve retention and degree completion by helping nontraditional students overcome the barriers erected by the demands

of their everyday lives. Offering virtual orientations for both online and on-campus students is one way of eliminating barriers (Schudde, 2016; Swett, 2016). One study found changing orientation for all nontraditional students to an online format resulted in an enrollment increase of 48% among that student population (Masterson, 2017). Garza Mitchell (2014) discovered implementation of a virtual orientation resulted in withdrawal rates for online courses dropping from 40-40% to 36-38%. Similarly, a study at another university found students who completed the online orientation in its entirety had GPAs that were 0.3 points higher than those who did not complete the orientation. Moreover, retention rates for students completing the orientation were slightly higher (Lieberman, 2017). While rates of participation in the online orientation were lower than Lieberman (2017) expected, the benefits of participation were evident.

For some colleges and universities, lack of participation in on-campus orientations was the impetus for migrating to a virtual orientation model (Jones, 2013). Attending a physical orientation may be a challenge for any working adult student, even those who attend on campus courses (Rose, 2018). Virtual orientations typically cover the same or similar content to an in-person orientation, but the activities aid students in becoming more accustomed to the online learning environment. Attendance rates tend to be higher when online student have the opportunity to complete the orientation virtually rather than attending an in-person equivalent (Jones, 2013).

Virtual orientations are becoming increasingly popular for both online and on-campus students, and low participation in traditional orientations has been a factor in offering online orientations for all student types (Jones, 2013; Rose, 2018). Rose (2018) analyzed the impact of participation in a virtual orientation on the utilization of student support services and campus resources, and the study revealed utilization increased subsequent to implementation of the virtual orientation. As a result of participation in the online orientation, students significantly increased their knowledge of the college's resources; furthermore, the students indicated they felt better prepared to begin their classes. These findings are significant because utilization of campus resources can have a positive effect on retention rates (Swett, 2016). Jones (2013) studied retention rates following student participation in a new mandatory virtual orientation. The survey results revealed 90% of students who completed the virtual orientation felt well-prepared to begin classes, and the institution experienced increases in its retention rate. The retention rate of online students before implementation of the virtual orientation was 71.8%. After implementing the new virtual orientation, the retention rate among the next three cohorts of students increased to 79.5%, 80%, and 84%, respectively (Jones, 2013).

The Rose (2018) and Jones (2013) studies appear to support an argument for offering virtual orientations to both on-ground and online students. Both researchers found virtual orientations had positive outcomes for student success. As a result of attending a virtual orientation, students increased their utilization of campus resources (Rose, 2015), and ultimately retention rates subsequently increased (Jones, 2013). Considering that attending a physical orientation may be a challenge for working adult students, even those who attend on-campus courses, a virtual orientation can be a viable alternative.

Conclusion

A significant amount of research has examined the correlation between completing an orientation—either on-ground or virtual—and student success. In findings consistent with research for in-person orientations, recent studies have supported a relationship between completing an online orientation and success indicators such as retention and GPA (Jones, 2013; Lieberman, 2017; Masterson, 2017). However, there is a need for additional research to evaluate the effectiveness of online orientations (Cho, 2012). This action research study evaluated recent changes to the orientation process at one private, liberal arts institution. Additionally, the study will analyze how those changes affected the academic preparedness and first semester retention of online students.

Research Design and Methods

To determine the impact of the new online student orientation on the retention rates of students at WPU, the researcher used archived retention data for the two years prior to the existence of the new online orientation, surveyed students who completed the orientation, and surveyed faculty teaching in online programs. The archival data established a baseline retention rate for how many online students started classes during the fall term and remained enrolled into their second term for the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 academic years. The researcher compared the baseline retention data to retention data for the cohort of students who enrolled in the fall 2018 term following implementation of the new virtual orientation. To ensure the reliability of the retention data, multiple reports were used. The director of institutional research at WPU creates a document for each incoming class called a *cohort flow model*. This document follows students from enrollment until their expected graduation date, showing how many students remained enrolled in each cohort and graduated on time. The university's IT department also creates reports showing how many students enrolled in a term have the status active, withdrawn, or dismissed at the end of that term. The researcher used all three data sources to ensure the retention rates used in this study were accurate.

WPU surveys students who complete the new orientation to obtain feedback on what they think they gained from the orientation. This survey was emailed to students around the midterm point of their first semester. The survey was delayed to midterm to allow students time to experience classes at WPU and better measure the effect of the orientation on their preparedness to begin their classes. Academic preparedness is a factor found to be a significant determinant in whether or not students are likely to remain enrolled in college courses (Rovai, 2003).

The survey of online faculty at WPU intended to gage improvements they noticed in student academic performance and preparedness following the implementation of the new orientation. Students may have a different perspective than faculty in terms of academic performance, so it was important to acquire both points of view. Faculty were asked whether they observed increases in academic performance and preparedness since the launch of the new orientation. In addition, faculty were asked to identify university resources students seemed to use more frequently following implementation of the virtual orientation.

To test the reliability of the data, triangulation was used. Triangulation involves utilizing multiple resources to gather data or utilizing the same sources at multiple points in time (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). The retention data at WPU was gathered from multiple sources to ensure reliability of the data. The student surveys were sent to all online students to ensure a reach a range of respondents. The faculty survey was sent to all faculty teaching in online programs. The researcher also used peer debriefing to ensure integrity of the data analysis. This method involves inviting a knowledgeable peer to review the data to determine if the researcher's conclusions are logical (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

Data Analysis

The researcher compiled the retention data as the first step of data collection. The archival data showed the first semester retention rate of online students at WPU was 88% during the fall 2016 term. Of the 129 students who began classes, 1.5% were academically dismissed, 1.5% transferred to another institution, and 8.5% withdrew from their first term. In the fall 2017 term, 2.5% of online students were academically dismissed and 8.5% withdrew: the overall retention rate for the fall 2017 term was 88%. The new online student orientation was launched for the fall 2018 semester. Retention data for the fall 2018 term showed no students were academically dismissed and 5% withdrew. Thus, the retention rate for the fall 2018 term was 95%, a 7% increase over the past two fall terms.

The student survey accounted for the second data set used for this study. In the fall 2018 term, 125

students enrolled at WPU. The University distributed a survey at midterm to all students who completed the orientation. The survey had a 5% response rate. Of the respondents, 66% had taken online classes before at another institution. All of the respondents completed at least some activities in each module of the orientation, but only 66% percent completed all of the activities. When asked which sections they found most informative during the orientation, 50% of respondents identified the time management section, and 50% identified the section explaining how to use the university's learning management system. When asked how well prepared they felt to begin classes after completing the orientation, 100% of respondents felt very well prepared or somewhat prepared. When asked how beneficial they felt the module regarding campus resources to be, 66% responded very beneficial, and 34% responded somewhat beneficial.

The faculty survey, the third data set used for this study, was emailed to 35 online faculty members at WPU; subsequently, there was a 31% response rate. All faculty members who responded were teaching online courses at the time of the survey, and had taught online courses prior to the implementation of the new orientation. When asked if they noticed an impact in students' overall academic performance, 50% of respondents indicated at least a moderate improvement. When asked if they observed an increase in student utilization of campus resources, 20% indicated there was some increase, 30% indicated no increase, and 50% felt unable to judge. The respondents identified the library, writing support, and technical support among the resources being used more frequently by students. When asked if they noticed an increased comfort level in students using WPU's learning management system, 90% of respondents indicated they noticed at least a moderate improvement.

Conclusion and Future Research Considerations

While the sample size from the surveys is small—only 6 respondents to the student survey and 11 respondents to the faculty survey—the findings between the two groups were similar. A majority of students and faculty believed the students who completed the online orientation seemed at least moderately well prepared to begin classes. A majority of the students believed the orientation to campus resources was helpful, and half of the faculty respondents noted an increase in students accessing campus resources. Similarly, half of the students expressed increased comfort with the technology, and 90% of faculty respondents shared the same observation.

The increase in student retention indicates the new online orientation at WPU is a practice that shows promise and needs additional study. In the first semester the online orientation was offered to students, both academic dismissals and student withdrawals decreased, a result consistent with other studies (Garza Mitchell, 2014; Lieberman, 2017). All of the student respondents agreed they were well-prepared to begin classes, and students who are prepared for coursework are much more likely to remain enrolled in their programs (Camara, 2013; Hepworth et al., 2018; Jones 2013). In addition to fewer students withdrawing from courses, there was a decrease in the number of students who were dismissed due to poor academic performance after the implementation of the new orientation. Faculty identified the tutoring and writing centers as areas they noticed students utilizing more often. When students use academic support services, they tend to perform better academically and are less likely to fail courses (Swett, 2016). While the results of this study support a link between the introduction of the new virtual orientation and increased online student retention in the fall 2018 term, further investigation is needed. One semester of increased retention is not a trend; thus, the researcher recommends that WPU continue to monitor retention data as well as track the long-term retention and graduation rate of the fall 2018 cohort. Since this study had a small number of respondents, statistical analysis of the data was not possible. Collecting data in subsequent years will lead to a data set robust enough for statistical analysis. Additionally, WPU can assess the effectiveness of the online orientation through the student and faculty surveys; the feedback collected through these surveys could yield information to improve the orientation. Despite the limited sample size, this study supports the use of an online orientation as a promising practice for online students.

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