

THE EFFECTS OF FRESHMAN ORIENTATION AND LOCUS OF CONTROL ON ADJUSTMENT TO COLLEGE: A FOLLOW-UP STUDY

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This study investigates the impact of orientation attendance and locus of control on the adjustment of traditional full-time college students to college life. Subjects were 242 upperclassmen from a large southwestern university. Results indicated that students with an internal locus of control orientation scored higher on the Freshman Transition Questionnaire (FTQ), indicating more successful adjustment to college life. No statistically significant relationship was found between attendance at Freshman Orientation and adjustment to college. Possible explanations for the lack of relationship are discussed.

Keywords: freshman orientation, locus of control, adjustment, college students, upperclassmen, Freshman Transition Questionnaire, success.

Orientation has been defined as "...any effort on the part of an institution to help entering students make the transition from their previous environment to the collegiate environment and to enhance their success in college" (Upcraft & Farnsworth, 1984, p. 27). By virtue of definition and programming, facilitating the adjustment process is one of the primary objectives of new student orientation programs at universities across the United States. Because it comes at the beginning of the college experience, orientation historically has been considered a transition cushion between past and future learning experiences. As such, some believe it has importance for students' integration into the campus environment (Sagaria, Higginson, & White, 1980; Titley, 1985).

Previous research on the subject, however, has proven inconclusive. For example, both Goodrich and Pierson's (1959) and Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfle's (1986)

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studies suggest the orientation experience impacts students' initial abilities to cope with a new set of social challenges in an unfamiliar environment. On the other hand, Martin and Dixon's (1989) article revealed no relationship between orientation attendance and adjustment to college.

An outgrowth of Martin and Dixon's (1989) research, the purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of orientation attendance and the student's locus of control on the adjustment of traditional full-time college students. Unlike the original study which investigated traditional full-time freshmen, this one investigates upperclassmen. Because of differences in programming between 1984 and 1987, this study sought to ask the question, "Do certain orientation programming formats enhance the adjustment to college process better than others?"

Herein, adjustment to college is defined as a multifaceted process that requires coping with or adapting to a new environment or situation (Baker & Siryk, 1984). The specific facets include academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and goal commitment-institutional attachment (Baker & Siryk, 1984).

The facets of adjustment may, in turn, vary as a function of locus of control orientation (Hartman & Fuqua, 1983; Keller & Pugh, 1976; Lefcourt, 1976; Rotter, 1966; Ryback & Sanders, 1980; Taylor, 1982). Based on social learning theory, the concept posits that individuals differ in the degree to which they attribute reinforcements to their own actions (internality) or to other forces such as luck, chance, fate, or powerful others (externality) (Rotter, 1966, 1975).

Four hypotheses were tested. First, it was hypothesized that students attending orientation will score significantly higher on the Freshman Transition Questionnaire (FTQ) and each of its four subscales than those who did not attend orientation. A second hypothesis stated that subjects attending orientation will score significantly more internal on the I-E Locus of Control Scale than nonattenders. Based on findings that present internals as more likely actively to seek information that will be useful in the future (Davis & Phares, 1967), it was predicted that internals will be more likely to attend an orientation conference than externals.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Traditional college-age students enrolled full-time at a large southwestern university were drawn from large sections of introductory history courses. There were 242 participants; 126 male, and 116 female, 150 attended orientation and 92 did not

attend. Third-semester freshmen accounted for 34.3% of the subjects; 47.1% sophomores, 13.6% juniors, and 5% were classified as seniors. Students were 86% white, 8.3% Hispanic, 3.7% black, and 1.7% Asian.

Although voluntary, orientation attendance was usually quite high. In 1987, over 87% of all entering freshmen attended orientation (Martin & Dixon, 1989).

PROCEDURES

The orientation process changed little between 1984 and 1987. Participation in orientation was voluntary. After being officially admitted to the University, students were allowed to make a reservation for one of the eight conferences. Although the orientation fee increased from \$15 to \$20, the size of each session stayed the same (an average of approximately 430). Parents and guests were allowed to attend at no charge. Although participants and their guests were encouraged to stay in the residence hall, they were not required to do so. Conferences were not held on weekends and were filled on a first-come, first-served basis.

The only major changes in orientation involved its length and the number of staff. Between 1984 and 1986, each freshman orientation session lasted three days; the student staff consisted of eight orientation aides and one graduate assistant. In the summer of 1987, sessions were shortened to two days and the student staff were increased to 12 undergraduate orientation aides, one graduate assistant, and one part-time undergraduate office worker. To determine if these changes had affected the subjects' adjustment scores analysis of variance was performed across all four orientation sessions. That there were no significant differences provided justification for pooling subjects to test the main hypotheses.

INSTRUMENTS

The Freshman Transition Questionnaire (FTQ) (Baker & Siryk, 1984) was used to assess students' success in adjusting to college life. The underlying assumption of the scale (currently retitled as the Adjustment to College Scale) is that adjustment to college is multifaceted and makes various demands on students that require different coping responses (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985). Accordingly, the 67-item questionnaire has a full scale and four subscales: (a) academic adjustment, related to motivation for, success in, and satisfaction with academic efforts; (b) social adjustment, the amount and success of social involvement on campus and coping with being away from family and friends at home; (c) personal-emotional adjustment, psychological distress and accompanying somatic symptoms; and (d) goal commitment – institutional attachment, satisfaction with college in general and at the

chosen college in particular. The score for a subscale is the sum of scores for the items constituting that subscale. The full scale score is the sum of scores for the 67 items. Coefficient alpha reliabilities for the full scale range between .93 and .95; for the academic adjustment subscale, between .84 and .88; for the social adjustment subscale, between .90 and .92; the personal-emotional adjustment subscale, between .78 and .85; and for the goal commitment-institutional attachment subscale, between .85 and .91 (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985; Baker & Siryk, 1986).

Validation studies indicate statistically significant relationships between the subscales and several criterion variables representing important behaviors or accomplishments in the lives of students, including attrition, appeals for services from a psychological clinic, grade point average, election to an academic honor society, involvement in social activities, and outcome of application for residence hall positions (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Baker & Siryk, 1986).

Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale consists of 23 forced choice items plus six filler items. Robinson and Shaver (1973) reported that the scale is used most often with college students. Each item is comprised of internal statements paired with external statements. One point is given for each external response. Scores range from zero (*most internal*) to 23 (*most external*). Internal reliability estimates range from .65 to .79 (Rotter, 1966). Self-report of control scales correlate with anxiety (Himle & Barcy, 1975), hopelessness and depression (Prociuk, Breen, & Lussier, 1976), social avoidance and self-esteem (Geist & Borecki, 1982), stress (Heretick, 1981) and self-report scales of adjustment (Warehime & Foulds, 1971).

STATISTICAL ANALYSES

Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were tested using *t*-tests. For hypothesis 3 where locus of control was used as an independent variable, scores were divided at the median (9) into external and internal groups. Hypothesis 4 was tested via a 2x2 analysis of variance.

RESULTS

All hypotheses were tested at the .05 level. The *t*-test comparisons for hypotheses 1 and 2 were nonsignificant. The absolute *t*-test values for H₁, H_{1A}, and H₂, ranged from .65 to 1.57 with none approaching significance. Hypothesis 3 was found to be significant at the .05 level (See Table 1). The analysis of variance test of hypothesis 4 failed to determine a significant interaction. Only main effect A (locus of control by

full scale score on the FTQ) was determined to be statistically significant (See Table 2). In summary, although locus of control seems to have an effect on students' adjustment to college, orientation attendance does not have an effect; there is no statistical evidence of any interaction between the two.

TABLE 1: HYPOTHESIS 3
T-TEST: INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL REGARDING
ADJUSTMENT TO COLLEGE

Source	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Internals	107	436.1308	54.284	6.72	0.000
Externals	114	384.6053	59.308		

TABLE 2: HYPOTHESIS 4
2x2 ANOVA: ANALYSIS OF ORIENTATION ATTENDANCE/NONATTENDANCE
LOCUS OF CONTROL AND ADJUSTMENT

SOURCE	<i>df</i>	SS	MS	F
Internal vs. External	1	147118.574	147118.574	45.266*
Attendance vs. Nonattendance	1	3650.562	3650.562	1.123
Interaction Effect	1	912.151	912.151	.281
Between	3	151097.959	50365.986	15.497
Within	217	705266.692	3250.077	
Total	220	856364.652	3892.567	

*significant at $p < .05$

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis stated that subjects attending orientation would score significantly higher on the FTQ than those who did not attend an orientation conference. No significant difference was found. Because orientation attenders are self-selected, nonsignificance suggests that those students who chose not to attend orientation may have been correct in their estimation that they did not need the pre-

college experience. Second, a deficit in orientation programming may account for a lack of support for this hypothesis. It could be that the orientation attendee arrives on campus with a greater confidence than the nonattender, but after entering the university milieu, the two groups become homogeneous. Because subjects were enrolled in at least the third semester of college, those who were less well adjusted to the university environment may have withdrawn already. Finally, a lack of support may be the result of using instruments that are not sensitive enough to detect differences between groups.

H_{1A} a sub-hypothesis, stated that subjects attending orientation would score significantly higher on each of the four subscales – academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and goal commitment-institutional attachment – within the FTQ. This hypothesis was intended to test specific facets of the adjustment process. While a lack of support for the subscales may indicate specific programming deficits, other explanations may also be valid. Certain areas of adjustment may present the student with a greater challenge than others or – as with the first main hypothesis – those students who elected not to attend orientation may have correctly ascertained that they did not need the extra assistance.

The second hypothesis (H₂) stated that subjects attending orientation would score significantly more internal on the internal/external locus of control scale than non-attenders. Nonsignificance here may be because some internals choose not to attend, given a more realistic assessment of their abilities than is generally found in externals. Externals would be more likely to attend as a result of external influences (i.e., parents and peers). Thus, locus of control would not be a deciding factor in the attendance decision.

The third hypothesis (H₃) stated that subjects characterized as internal locus of control on Rotter's I-E Locus of Control Scale would score significantly higher on the FTQ than those characterized by external locus of control. This hypothesis was significant at the .05 level. It was expected that internals would experience lower levels of anxiety and depression than externals, as has been reported in the literature. Simultaneously, internals would be expected to seek the necessary resources to facilitate the adjustment process.

The fourth hypothesis (H₄) explored the interaction effects between locus of control and orientation attendance on the freshman's adjustment process. Like Hypothesis 1 there was a lack of significance for main effect B; significance for main effect A, likewise, reinforces significant findings for hypothesis 3. Locus of control seems to

have an effect on adjustment to college while orientation attendance does not. There is no statistical evidence of any interaction between the two.

CONCLUSION

A lack of significant differences between orientation attenders and nonattenders during the third semester of college is not a definitive indication that orientation is ineffective. The most optimistic conclusion is that those who needed orientation participated in the program. The question remains: What if they had not attended? Would they have failed their early college experience? We can conclude that while the effectiveness of orientation may be debatable, there appear to be positive consequences associated with the relationship to parents and positive public relations with the community. That internals scored significantly higher on the FTQ than did externals is as predicted and in keeping with the nature of the construct. Future research should track the college success orientation attenders and nonattenders during the first year of their college experience as another way to measure the success of such programs.

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