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FINDING THEIR WAY

EVALUATION OF THE PILOT ORIENTATION AT IVY TECH RICHMOND

INDIANA PROJECT ON
ACADEMIC SUCCESS

IPAS RESEARCH BRIEF

INTRODUCTION

The new orientation piloted at Ivy Tech Richmond was the result of an invested assessment into the needs of students, especially as they revolved around three challenge areas: (a) the concerns of first-generation students; (b) provision and reinforcement of academic support; and (c) increasing all students' knowledge about vital aspects of financial aid. The Ivy Tech Richmond IPAS team believed that an increase in students' *academic literacy* would address needs identified within these three areas.

Academic literacy was defined by the team as knowledge about college processes, services and, importantly, the students' role in them. With increased academic literacy, the team believed that students would be more successful. Success was broadly defined as the achievement of students' academic goals at Ivy Tech Richmond, whatever they may be.

METHODS

In this brief, we report the impact of orientation as it was illustrated in a qualitative evaluation. Data collection centered mainly on focus group discussions with students who participated in the new orientation. In these discussions, we asked students to recount their experiences and perceptions of the program. In addition, we interviewed faculty and administrators who had interacted with students as a part of the program. This second group of interviews focused on faculty and administrators' own experience with the new orientation and on how they perceived the program to have affected the students

Two focus groups were conducted with students for a total of 12 participants, 9 interviews were with administrators drawn from a variety of professional roles, and 11 phone interviews were conducted with faculty. The transcripts from these interviews totaled 119 pages of data. The analysis of the transcripts used an inductive approach to identify emergent themes (*Qualitative Data Analysis*, 2nd ed., M. B. Miles & A. M. Huberman, Sage, 1994). The coding was limited to issues pursuant to the broad research question: "What impact is orientation having?" For example, even though the data may have revealed fascinating insights about nontraditional students, they have not been included in this analysis or report unless related to the effect and efficacy of orientation at Ivy Tech Richmond.

FINDINGS

The students involved in the focus groups were fairly representative of the typical population of students at Ivy Tech Richmond. They described themselves as young mothers, laid-off workers retraining, young people who may have struggled at high school, students who needed to stay close to home, and proud first-generation college students. They often talked through a language of difference and a language of struggle, about themselves and about Ivy Tech. They described themselves as different from the nation's typical student population, as being special and having unique needs.

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One student explained the difference between them and students at other colleges:

I know a lot of big universities are about the money. They're about getting the rich kids there, and with a small school like [this], everybody here is working for the same goal. They're not just there because their mommy and daddy are paying for it. We're all here because we have a goal. We have things we're working for, and everybody understands. Even the adults understand that, because a lot of them were like us and went through similar situations. They struggled before they went to college; they've had burdens while they were doing it just like every person at this school. (Female student, Focus Group 2).

Some participants, like the woman quoted here, described an affinity with other students and generally with faculty and administrators at Ivy Tech. Consequently, they seem to see Ivy Tech Richmond as both different from "big universities" and a positive place to be. It is a place where people care and things are happening. They talked about going to orientation feeling a fear of the unknown and of "not being able" to manage college. Now they feel that Ivy Tech is safe and familiar, and they can demonstrate that they have the skills and knowledge to navigate their way at college. Students described orientation as an explicit part of the journey from fear to familiarity, from being unable to being able.

There are three major, salient themes in the data that provide some insight into the impact of orientation on the participants: students' self-efficacy, the "personal touch," and orientation as "the start."

SELF-EFFICACY

The students experienced and expressed an increased confidence and awareness that they

attributed in some part to their attendance at orientation. They reported, for example, that the program "helped me not be so scared, and they showed you what [college] was about." Another stated, "It gave me the confidence just to know what I was doing." Knowing what it was about gave them the courage to return to Ivy Tech when classes started. It demystified and personalized their start at college, whether they were fresh out of high school or returning to college to retrain after being laid off. Orientation gave them knowledge of things they did not know, and students talked of using the things they had learned. Some were enthusiastic about the computer training they received, others with financial aid information. Most were checking their grades on e-learning and using other resources they had been exposed to such as the learning resources center. As demonstrated by the following interaction between two students, most important was the confidence that "Maybe there were still questions, but if I had a question . . ." "You know who to go to."

Administrators described their observations of changes in student behaviors in comparison with students who did not go through orientation, such as returning students. They reported that the students seemed more self-sufficient, as demonstrated by appearing better prepared and more informed than in years past. Several administrators noted that students were contacting them less for information or assistance or were asking better, more sophisticated questions when they did contact them. They claimed that students appeared to be using the online services more, because when they did call for assistance it sometimes confirmed that they had used the online services properly or had understood the information on the website. The administrators also described the effect of orientation on their work—some said they were able to work more efficiently due to decreased student traffic during normal hours. Those involved with admissions claimed they were able to organize their work at set times rather than having odd appointments all the time.



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Faculty also reported some differences with their first-year students in comparison with past years. Some believed that attendance had improved and that their students seemed more informed. Faculty had a sense that their first-year students were taking more initiative, as demonstrated in the increased use of online resources by students, for example. Many faculty said they had noticed students using the e-learning resources far more than any previous year to check grades and assignments. Their evidence of this came through students' reminders to post things on the site and by the log-in sheet. One faculty member commented that he used to get "hammered" with questions on how to use e-learning, but this academic year he had noticeably fewer questions.

Orientation seems to have shaped the way students were negotiating college. After starting classes they seemed to be doing things for themselves rather than asking staff, taking the initiative to keep on top of their class progress, and using services more than new students had in the past.

THE "PERSONAL TOUCH"

Staff and faculty at Ivy Tech were described glowingly by most of the students for the way they interact with students. As one student pointed out, the positive interaction starts at orientation, "The staff was all there, so they came in and said 'hi.'" Simple things like calling professionals by their first names and having home phone numbers from faculty are significant to the students. As indicated by the student quoted above, having so many people attend orientation "just for them" was noticed and appreciated by the students. They found value in being able to talk with "really friendly" faculty and staff. "They talk to you, they work with you about a lot of things, and they don't just sit there on a business level. They try to get down to your level and work with you on everything, just so you're not on your own." Thanks to the investment of faculty and staff, college becomes about community and family instead of fear and lonely struggle. Most of these students feel connected, communicated with, and part of a community of care.

Several students mentioned that people at orientation and at Ivy Tech in general made them feel like "not a number." One woman felt they went "above and beyond" in their attention to and care of students. They attributed this care to an impression that Ivy Tech was doing more and that as a small college it was able to be more attentive to students—unlike other colleges. In some ways, the students interpreted orientation itself and the way it was designed as an expression of care. The care of students is not only espoused at Ivy Tech through orientation and beyond but is enacted—and the students see and value that.

ORIENTATION AS "THE START"

adjust to and negotiate college. According to the students, the lessons they learned in orientation were reinforced by faculty and staff at Ivy Tech. The services and people they were introduced to in orientation continued to support the students after orientation. For example, several students mentioned the continuing help they received from staff in the financial aid office. Orientation did not offer any false promises about who they were and what Ivy Tech can offer them.

We might safely conclude from their own descriptions that the students felt more prepared. Indeed, orientation may have given the participating students a head start in comparison to past students. Interestingly, a few faculty and staff noted that students were helping each other more and would reference what they learned in orientation in doing so.

Of huge importance to students is what may be called the "personal touch."

Importantly, the students indicate that orientation was just the start in helping them

THEIR WORDS

SELF-EFFICACY

They know how to use services better. They're being more self-sufficient (Administrator #1)

Students that did not go through new student orientation are the students calling us on a regular basis . . . "I don't understand this, I don't know how this works," that sort of thing. New students, we're not getting those questions from them—or very few. (Administrator #3)

It [orientation] gives you the confidence to know what to do. (Student, Focus Group 2)

I know a lot of them [students] are using the e-learning service more online so I think that really helped. Showing them what that was during orientation is why they are using it a lot more. (Faculty)

THE "PERSONAL TOUCH"

I think it diminishes part of their fears going through the orientation and becoming familiar with administrators and faculty. (Administrator #7)

You can tell right off the bat that they were there for you. They went above and beyond. (Student, Focus Group 1)

It's good to know you can Always have somebody to talk to (Student, Focus Group 1)

You're not just a number at Ivy Tech. There are people that truly care. (Student, Focus Group 2)

"THE START"

[Orientation is] a way to reinforce to them that they are doing the right thing by going to school and what they need to do to be successful as a student. (Administrator #2)

Orientation was the reason why I took this class. (Student, Focus Group 2)

It's less difficult for me to teach that [web] because they've already had an introduction to it. (Faculty)

The most significant example of orientation as “the start” is that all of the new degree-seeking students in the focus groups were taking the orientation class. They claimed this was because of the way it was talked about as being helpful during orientation. This suggests that the information these students received in orientation affected their choice of classes and that the study-skills sections of the program were important to them.

THOUGHTS ON FINDINGS

The new orientation seems to have affected Ivy Tech Richmond in a few ways: It may have contributed to an increase in students’ self-efficacy, administrators believe they can work more efficiently because of it, and some faculty feel they can concentrate on their classes rather than having to teach new students how to use services at Ivy Tech. Students described orientation as a success not only because of the information they received and have used but because of the way orientation made them feel—cared for and important. The key part of this was the people from Ivy Tech who were involved in orientation. Having staff and faculty available to talk to them helped the students feel comfortable and supported in their new academic endeavors.

HOT TOPICS

Based on the administrators’ interviews, there appear to be some topics which have been controversial or often discussed during preparations for, design, and implementation of the program. Reading between the lines, there seems to have been some discussion about (a) the length of the program, (b) whether it should be mandatory, (c) the technology skills displayed and required in the program, and (d) whether the orientation is just too overwhelming. All of these concerns come from a desire to serve the students in your institution as well as you can while being sensitive to their needs. Each of these concerns is discussed below, with the students’ perspective as well. Additional participant voices appear on page 5.

LENGTH OF PROGRAM

Some of the administrators worried about the time commitment of orientation for students. However, the students themselves didn’t even mention this in a negative light until asked what the worst thing was about orientation. Even then, one group’s first complaint was not about length, but that “It was hot!” The first thing they remembered was the program’s usefulness. One group was especially enthusiastic about this. Some students even saw the length as an indicator of how informative it was, although one student thought that the whole agenda could have been covered in less time. In general, the way students felt about this concern is summed up in the words of one student, “You may be there for four hours, but you learn everything.”

Students were reported resistant with administrators before the program, but based on the positive focus group responses, the worth of the session outweighed the time commitment. One student did say, to some general agreement, that he did not like sitting so long during the informational pieces. But, even this student later discussed how useful the orientation was and how vital it was that students not miss it. The students also appreciated that the presentations of information were varied and that they had opportunities to move around.

CHEAT SHEET

ADMINISTRATORS SAID . . .

- They are able to do their own jobs more efficiently
- They receive less calls from new students
- Students that do ask questions are asking “better” or more sophisticated ones
- They believe students are more self-efficient
- They believe students are better prepared to navigate college

FACULTY SAID . . .

- Several feel students seem more knowledgeable about college
- Some think attendance may be better than previous semesters
- Almost all have found that students are using and checking e-learning more

STUDENTS SAID . . .

- They help themselves and use information from orientation
- They learned things they would not have known
- They chose to do the orientation class because of orientation
- They feel cared about, important
- They know where to go for help
- They feel good about Ivy Tech

Regarding student concerns that may have been linked to program length, none of the students complained about the difficulty of getting time off work. One student referred to “the kids” when talking about the length, but no one complained of trouble getting childcare. None mentioned transportation issues, but several liked the food, with one joking that Ivy Tech is good at bribing people with food to attend events. Balancing these unstructured responses with the overall positive response of students to their orientation experience, as long as Ivy Tech Richmond continues to be thoughtful about how they plan the day, the time commitment need not be a concern.

COMPUTERS

overwhelmed by the computer segment of orientation, especially as they are aware students have different levels of technology literacy. The students talked about computers and technology quite excitedly—mentioning how much they enjoyed learning about email, websites, Smart Board, and Blackboard; how they liked checking their grades online; and how excited they were about the USB flash-drive gift they received for attending orientation. Some students were in the group that administrators were worried about—the older returnees to higher education—but none of these students expressed concern over the use of computers. Delivered with sensitivity and reinforcement, this segment need not be overwhelming for students. In any case, negative feelings toward new technology lessen with appropriate knowledge, which is probably better acquired sooner rather than later!

MANDATORY OR NOT?

requirement at orientation, especially from a perspective considering the needs of a more nontraditional student body, not a single student complained about this during the focus groups, and only one mentioned the fact that it was mandatory. In fact, they expressed appreciation of the different session times the team had available for them to pick from.

Administrators may hear some grumbling that the program is mandatory prior to attendance at the program; but after attending orientation, its value seems to outweigh any inconvenience. Bearing in mind the students’ comments, the flexibility of the schedule seems to be important to them, therefore your institution should continue to offer the different times from which participants can choose.

OVERWHELMING?

the decision to go to college as being overwhelming—not orientation itself. Students described themselves as feeling “nervous,” “confused,” and “lost.” One older female student described the feeling of coming to college for the first time as similar to how she felt starting high school, “You’ve just got craziness.” Enmeshed in that crazy feeling, students did find help at Ivy Tech Richmond.

For the students in these focus groups, orientation was part of the solution to the overwhelming feelings they had starting at college—not something that added to their distress.

Administrators were concerned that students would be scared and

Although some administrators expressed concern about the rigidity of the attendance

Students do have a lot to take in during orientation, but these students talked about

HOT TOPICS QUOTES

LENGTH . . .

The orientation that they have is very informative/Oh, yes. We were there for four hours/It’s relaxed. It doesn’t make you feel like “Let’s get it over with.” (Focus Group 2)

We had one student particularly that was just a real pain from the beginning. He didn’t want to come to a session. He didn’t want to take an assessment test. He wanted everything just given to him. At the end of the session he was the one student that said, “You know, I really learned a lot from that.” (Administrator)

I’m not big on lectures at all. I don’t like sitting through slideshows. I personally didn’t like sitting there for an hour and a half. (Focus Group 1)

COMPUTERS . . .

There’s a whole, different, new world. Everything’s online, so that’s pretty neat. (Focus Group 1).

They show you the school website, how to use it, access emails, financial aid information. It’s helpful if you’re a new student. (Focus Group 2).

MANDATORY . . .

I got in on a Friday night (laughs). I’ve got kids. I’ve got nothing better to do on a Friday night! (Focus Group 2)

They’re good at bribing people to be there with food (laughs)! (Focus Group 2).

OVERWHELMING . . .

You feel very overwhelmed and orientation eases that. When you walk in after you’ve had orientation [you know] where to go for help. (Focus Group 2)

There were people there who would help me. It wasn’t as bad as I had pictured in my head. (Focus Group 1)

THINKING AHEAD

Students and staff found it hard to talk about any unforeseen negative effects of orientation or how it might be improved. Although that is good news for the program as a whole, it does give the IPAS team very little to work with as decisions are made regarding in what ways the pilot was successful, if it will continue, and about any improvements necessary for the program.

SUGGESTIONS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

- A few administrators were concerned about the impact of new e-FA and student debt. Consider including a section on money management.
- Sometimes students aren't ready for registration when they come to orientation. What can be done about this?
- An administrator noticed that the Business Office was not mentioned in orientation. Consider whether or not this is an important service for inclusion.
- As the orientation means new demands for administrators and staff during traditional nonworking hours—consider introducing some flexibility during the working week for administrators who are giving up evenings and Saturdays.
- As advisors are often the first point of contact—consider increasing their knowledge of financial aid.
- Students really valued the tour. Try to include this in future orientations in the new building.
- Some students mentioned they had to wait or come back to register. Consider having more people for registering or doing it a different way.
- Keep presentation styles and activities varied to help the students pay attention.
- How can more program chairs and faculty be involved?

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Orientation seems to have had an impact at Ivy Tech Richmond, from the way people do their jobs to the way students feel and go about their educational experience. As you think about the future of an orientation program, you may want to consider some of the following questions.

- Do you believe you have enough information to evaluate whether orientation has made a difference to students?
- What do these findings mean to you?
- What has surprised you?
- What has disappointed you?
- Can you discern areas of improvement? How would these improvements be achieved?
- Do you have enough staff and energy to maintain this effective an orientation over the long term? It is the people presence that the students really respond to.