

Summer Orientation: Reducing the Concern and Comfort of New Students

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OVERVIEW

A survey was administered to new students at the beginning of their Summer Orientation session. A random sample of respondents was also sent a follow-up survey several weeks after orientation. The purpose of this study was to compare responses to a series of 26 items assessing students' concerns about attending college at UW and to a series of five items assessing students' comfort with their academic abilities.

As a result of Summer Orientation, students' concerns were significantly lowered for all items but one. The largest change was shown for the item: *Whether my decision to attend UW is the right one for me*, for which the average level of concern was lowered more than a full scale. Three of the five comfort items also showed a significant decrease. On average, the students felt less comfortable using a computer and doing library research for a class or own interests, and they felt less well-prepared to succeed academically at UW after Orientation. It appears that the students leave orientation feeling that they will be able to cope with the challenges of college, but that they may not be quite as outstanding as scholars they had thought they were.

INTRODUCTION

Each summer, [New Student Programs](#) within the Office of Undergraduate Education offer one and two day orientation sessions for new students. During the summer of 1998, 3,766 of 4,168 (89.4%) newly admitted freshmen and 1,293 of 2,061 (62.7%) newly admitted transfer students attended these sessions. Surveys were administered to all orientation attendees at the beginning of their first session and were completed by 81% of the freshmen and 69% of the transfer attendees. In addition, surveys were mailed to a random sample of 1,100 students who had completed the initial surveys, two to three weeks after they had completed orientation. Surveys were completed by 815 (74%) of this sample of new students. (See [OEA Report 98-4](#) for the methodology, survey instruments, and response frequencies).

The two surveys had items within two sections in common. The first section dealt with extent of student concern with 25 aspects of college life. For the pre-orientation survey, the stem was worded: *How concerned are you with each of the following?* For the post-orientation survey, the stem was worded: *After your orientation session or registration date, how concerned are you with each of the following?* On both surveys, the following response options and their corresponding numerical codes were as follows:

- Extremely (5)
- Very (4)
- Moderately (3)
- Slightly (2)
- Not at all (1)

The second section dealt with comfort and contained five items. The stem for the items on both questionnaires was: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?* Response options and their corresponding numerical codes were as follows:

- Strongly agree (5)
- Agree (4)
- Neutral (3)
- Disagree (2)
- Strongly disagree (1)

The purpose of this report is to compare the responses of the students on these 30 items, before and after orientation. For this analysis, only students who had completed both surveys and whose student number could be matched across surveys were included. The number of students meeting this criteria varied across items from 486 to 503. Statistical significance was tested using paired *t*-tests.

RESULTS

Concern

Each of the 25 "concern" items is listed in [Table 1](#). For each item, the percentage of students whose ratings indicated a decrease in concern from before to after Orientation is indicated, as is the percentage who did not change their rating and the percentage whose ratings indicated an increase in concern. Also found in Table 1 are the averages for the pre- and post-orientation ratings, using the response weightings indicated above. The statistical significance of the difference between these means is indicated by paired *t*-test values. Items are listed in order of *t*-values, from largest to smallest, rather than by order of the questionnaire. All *t*-values are statistically significant ($p < .001$) but that for the last item listed.

The most impressive result from the above table is that students decreased their level of concern, on average, on every item. Similarly, a larger percentage of students decreased their level of concern than increased it on every item. The only difference that was not significant was for *Balancing studies with and/or family responsibilities*.

The largest change was shown for the item: *Whether my decision to attend UW is the right one for me*. At the start of orientation, students, on average, were above "moderately". After orientation, they were, on average, below "slightly". The change was more than a full scale point! This concern was lessened for nearly two-thirds of the students as a result of orientation. The average concern was decreased by one-half to two-thirds of a scale point on seven items, led by *Meeting new people* and the *Quality of instruction*. Nearly one-half of the students lowered their rating on each these items.

The items where concern was least effected by Orientation were *Balancing studies with work and/or family responsibilities*, *Course availability*, and *Graduating on time*. These may be areas in which students' concerns are more justified.

It is also interesting to note where students greatest concerns lay. The largest average for both pre and post orientation surveys, by far, was *Getting good grades*. This item was followed by *School workload*. The item of least concern for all students was *Living away from home*, but even that concern was significantly lowered by Orientation.

Comfort

[Table 2](#) presents the same data for the five "comfort" items as was presented for the 25 "concern" items.

The average pre- and post-orientation ratings were essentially equivalent for two of the items: *I feel comfortable in the UW environment* and *I feel comfortable asking for help in a library*. The remaining three items were significant in the direction of students feeling less comfort after Orientation than before. On average, the students felt less comfortable using a computer and doing library research for a class or own interests, and they felt less well-prepared to succeed academically at UW. One should note, however, that averages on all items tend to be high, averaging right around the "agree" level. This high level of confidence persists after Orientation even though some averages are reduced.

DISCUSSION

The data presented above indicate that students come to the Summer Orientation Program with a number of concerns about college in general and the UW in particular. The Orientation Program appears to do an effective job in reducing these concerns. It is especially gratifying to see the student's concern about whether UW was the right choice for them substantially reduced to "slightly", on average. Equally impressive were significant reductions of concerns across 24 of the 25 areas covered. Students clearly left orientation less worried about what they were about to confront and their ability to cope with it.

Ironically, students' comfort with their own abilities tended to decrease from before to after orientation. However, unlike the concern items, ratings on these items tended to be fairly high. At the beginning of orientation, students agreed, on average, that they were comfortable using a computer, doing library research, and asking for help in the library. They felt well prepared to succeed academically and felt comfortable in the UW environment. Yet, the orientation session had essentially no effect on ratings of the item *I feel comfortable in the UW environment* in spite of the decreasing levels of concerns after orientation. Further, students' feelings of preparedness decreased, on average, even though their concern about getting good grades also decreased.

How can we understand this seeming inconsistency? One can only speculate. Students who attend UW tend to be the top students in their high school, and prior research confirms the current findings that they come with a great deal of confidence in their abilities. During orientation sessions, it is possible that they confront the fact that, unlike high school, equally capable students surround them. Furthermore, some orientation sessions surely promote the ideas that much will be expected of these students and that the pace and level of difficulty will exceed that which they are used to. To overstate, it seems that perhaps the students leave orientation feeling that they will be able to cope with the challenges of college, but that they may not be quite as outstanding as they had thought they were.