

# Student Perceptions of Preparedness for Academic Success: The Impact of an Advisor Taught Orientation Course in Family and Consumer Sciences

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## Abstract

This paper reports on data from a study assessing whether a first year orientation course taught by academic advisors influenced Family and Consumer Sciences students' perceptions of preparedness for success in college and their major. The orientation course was designed by academic advisors, in consultation with faculty, to target the skills students need to be successful in their major and throughout their college careers. Topics included careers in the chosen major, professional communication, registration readiness and problem-solving. Students completed surveys at the beginning and end of the course and these results were compared to test for significant differences. Results revealed that students rated themselves as feeling more knowledgeable and prepared after completing the orientation course.

## Introduction

Unprepared students entering college is a growing problem. Many students admitted to four year institutions are taking remedial classes in order to progress in subjects such as Math and English (Haycock et al., 1999). In 2000, 28% of college students entering a four year program needed to take remedial coursework, with mathematics being the most problematic subject (Long et al., 2009). Many four year institutions have eliminated their remedial programs, opting to send students to community colleges in order to complete their coursework to catch up to their peers (Bettinger and Long, 2005). In a study conducted in Florida, \$118.3 million was spent on remedial education with both the state and the students enrolled sharing the burden of these costs (Long et al., 2009).

Unpreparedness can lead to a multitude of problems for student retention and graduation. Freshman dropout

rates are over 30% and many students are extending their graduation dates past the four year mark (Colton et al., 1999). Universities are working hard on finding ways to retain their students. Research shows that students who interact with faculty, staff and other students tend to be more secure with their environment and their college surroundings (Glass and Garrett, 1995; Murtaugh et al., 1999). One of the best options to address the problem of retention is to hold a freshmen orientation class for credit. Glass and Garrett (1995) state "an orientation is the single most effective intervention technique available to colleges for enhancing freshman success" (p. 119).

The first orientation course was offered in 1911 in Oregon and such classes increased in popularity during the 1980s (Bedford and Durkee, 1989). According to Barefoot and Fidler (1996), orientation courses educate incoming students about college expectations and provide resources to promote success. Previous studies have found that students enrolled in these orientation courses have higher rates of retention and earn better grades in their college coursework (e.g., Murtaugh et al., 1999). One of the most innovative orientation courses is University 101 at the University of South Carolina Columbia. Teachers for the course are both faculty members and work in student affairs (Shanley and Witten, 1990). Survival rates for freshman returning to sophomore year who completed University 101 ranged from 77.2%-84.5% while nonparticipants had a range of 73.2%-80% (Bedford and Durkee, 1989).

While most of the existing studies measure success in these freshmen orientation courses in terms of retention or GPA, the goal of the present study is to assess student perceptions of preparedness before and after the completion of an orientation course. Student perceptions

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play a key role in academic achievement. Santiago and Einarson (1998) explored student characteristics as predictors of student academic confidence and efficacy in new graduate students. They found that students' perceptions of academic preparedness positively predicted academic self-efficacy (beliefs about success). While not examined in this paper, the hope is that students' positive perceptions of academic preparedness will be linked to academic self-efficacy and achievement.

### **The Present Study**

This study was conducted in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCSC) in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) at a major southwestern university. FCSC offers two majors: Family Studies and Human Development (FSHD) and Retailing and Consumer Sciences (RCSC). Students in both majors are required to take a one-unit orientation course to better prepare them for success in college, their specific major and life after graduation. The orientation course (known as 197A) was designed by academic advisors in consultation with faculty to specifically target skills students need to succeed. Course topics include career opportunities in the students' majors, communication skills (including academic writing and professional email etiquette), registration and University-wide computer systems, problem-solving, critical-thinking and campus resources.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate student perceptions of preparedness before and after the completion of the mandatory orientation course. It was hypothesized, based on previous research on the effectiveness of such courses and the specificity of which the course targets students' needed skills, that students would rate their perceptions of academic preparedness higher after completing the orientation course.

### **Materials and Methods**

#### **Participants**

Student participants were recruited from the FCSC orientation courses in the fall and spring semesters of an academic year. A total of 231 students were enrolled in these courses; 132 (124 females, 8 males) students answered both the pre- and post-test survey and are included in the present study. Although the gender distribution seems skewed, these numbers reflect the composition of the FCSC majors. There were 104 students majoring in FSHD and 28 majoring in RCSC. Forty-two percent of participants identified as freshmen, 35% as sophomores, 19% as juniors and 4% as seniors. Students ranged in age from 18 to 25 ( $m = 19.4$ ,  $sd = 1.6$ ). Sixty-seven percent self-identified as White, 24% as Hispanic/

Latino, 4% as African-American, 3% as Asian and 2% as American Indian.

#### **Instruments**

Prior to beginning the study, the University of Arizona Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and all participants provided written informed consent. Students completed a pre- and post-test survey at the beginning and end of the orientation course. Students rated themselves on a five-point scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree) on seven items to assess their perceptions of preparedness. The seven items were: "I am knowledgeable about my major," "I am knowledgeable about careers I can pursue with this degree," "I am confident with the quality of my resume," "I am confident about my ability to professionally communicate," "I am knowledgeable about resources on campus," "I am comfortable using the university online services," and "I am knowledgeable about pre-major requirements." Participants also rated themselves on three items on a scale of one to five (1: very unlikely to 5: very likely) on how likely they were to graduate from university, graduate with their current major and return to campus the next semester.

#### **Procedure**

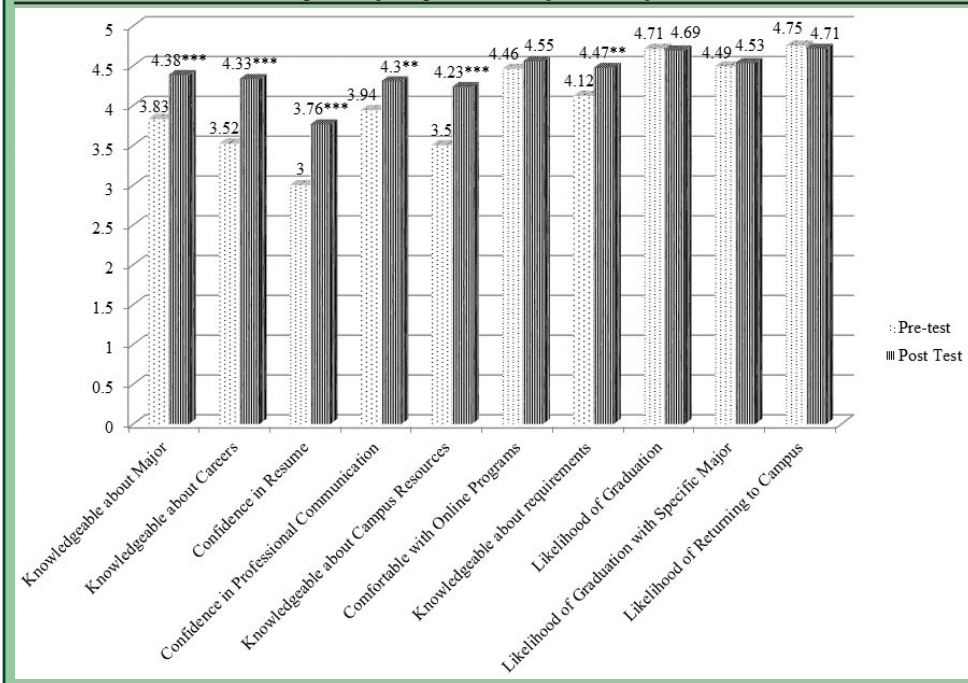
Students enrolled in the FCSC orientation courses were provided with a link to the pre-test survey during the first week of the semester. During the last week of the semester, students were sent an email inviting them to complete the post-test survey. Students were awarded extra credit in the class for completing both the pre- and post-test survey. In order to not coerce students into completing the survey, they were also offered an alternative extra credit assignment for the same amount of credit. The instructors were provided with a list of students who completed both the pre- and post-test survey, but no identifying link between individual results and student names.

### **Results and Discussion**

Means were computed for the students' pre- and post-test data (Table 1). T-tests were then run to compare the pre- and post-test data to test whether student perceptions of preparedness had changed. With regards to preparedness, six of the seven items were significantly different. Students rated greater agreement on the post-test on knowledge of major ( $t = -4.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ), knowledge about careers related to major ( $t = -6.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confidence with quality of resume ( $t = -5.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confidence with professional communication ( $t = -2.73$ ,  $p < .01$ ), knowledge about resources on campus ( $t = -5.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and knowledge of pre-major requirements

## Student Perceptions

**Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Preparedness Before and After the Orientation Course**



( $t = -2.68, p < .01$ ). The only non-significant item was comfort using university online services. Participants also rated their likeliness to graduate from university, with their current major and return the following semester. None of these differences were significant.

The goal of this study was to explore whether a first year university course would affect students' perceptions of preparedness. By creating an orientation course designed to teach students both general university success skills and major specific knowledge, it was hypothesized that after completing the course, students would rate themselves as feeling more knowledgeable, prepared and confident about their college success. Results supported this hypothesis, as students rated themselves significantly higher on major knowledge, career knowledge, resume quality, communication skills, knowledge of campus resources and pre-major requisite knowledge.

There were some limitations to this study. First, there was survey attrition. Only 57% of students enrolled in the orientation course completed both the pre- and post-test survey. It is possible that students who felt more prepared and confident were more likely to complete both surveys. Second, as this study was not an experiment, there was no means of controlling for external variables that may have influenced student perceptions. It is not known how other courses, peers, or environmental factors may have played a role. Third, no significant differences were found in students' ratings of their likelihood to return to and graduate from the university and the major. The lack of these significant findings may be due to the students' very high initial pre-test ratings. For example, when

asked how likely they were to graduate from the university, the mean on the pre-test was a 4.71 (on a scale of 1 to 5).

In the future, it would be valuable to continue to study the effectiveness of first year orientation courses and their influence on student perceptions. The authors plan to add a component to their study that directly assesses knowledge in addition to exploring student perceptions. Also, it is important to follow students over time and track whether completion of the course and perceptions of preparedness are linked to retention and graduation rates. The present study adds to a growing body of research that

highlights the importance of orientation courses for college student success. Student preparedness and perceptions of preparedness should continue to be explored to increase student retention, graduation and success in the work force.

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