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ABSTRACT

In fall 1981, entering freshmen at Bronx Community College (BCC) were encouraged to attend a 10-week non-credit orientation course (SPD-99), in which counselors used a variety of materials and instructional procedures to assist students with their educational, career, and personal development and to introduce students to various campus resources and services. In fall 1982, entering freshmen were required to attend a one-credit, 15-week orientation course (OCD-01), which had a similar focus, but a standardized outline. A study was conducted to determine and compare the effects of the two courses on students' mean cumulative grade point average (GPA) and retention rate. The study compared the performance of 195 students who attended SPD-99 five or more times, 1,082 students who did not attend SPD-99 at all, 732 students who attended OCD-01 more than seven times, and 678 students who did not attend OCD-01 at all. Study findings, based on a random sample of every third student in each group, included the following: (1) the mean GPA and re-enrollment rate of students who attended SPD-99 five or more times were significantly higher than those of students who did not attend the class at all; (2) attendance of OCD-01 had a similarly positive effect on students' GPA and retention rates; and (3) the mean GPA and re-enrollment rates of students who attended SPD-99 were significantly higher than those of students who attended OCD-01. (HB)

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The Effects of Two College Orientation Courses Upon
the Academic Performance and Retention of Entering Freshmen

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to determine the effects of Bronx Community College's freshmen orientation courses, SPD-99 and OCD-01, upon the mean cumulative grade point average (GPA) and retention rate of entering freshmen.

In the Fall of 1981, entering freshmen enrolled in SPD-99, a 10 session non-credit course. Comparisons were made between students who attended five or more sessions and those who attended none. Analysis of covariance indicated a significant increase in the mean GPA and retention rate for those who attended five or more sessions. In the Fall of 1982, entering freshmen enrolled in OCD-01, a 15 session one credit course. Comparisons were made between students who attended seven or more sessions and those who attended none. Analysis of covariance indicated a significant increase in the mean GPA and retention rate for those who attended seven or more sessions. Additionally, students who attended SPD-99 five or more times had a significantly higher mean GPA and retention rate than those who attended OCD-01 seven or more times. The investigators concluded that the non-credit SPD-99 course attracted volunteers who were already highly motivated to improve themselves academically.

The Effects of Two College Orientation Courses Upon
the Academic Performance and Retention of Entering Freshmen

In recent years, the influx of nontraditional, academically underprepared students has prompted many colleges and universities to offer freshman orientation programs, including full semester courses. Such programs are intended to help students survive academically and to cope with the emotional demands of college life. While there is no shortage of answers to the why, what, and how in regard to freshman orientation programs, few attempts have been made to determine the effects of such programs upon student performance and retention.

According to Foxely (1969), Guber (1970), and Rothman (1967), many studies directed toward the orientation process are limited in scope and content and tend to be less optimistic than those undertaken in group counseling. They found no significant positive change among students exposed to freshman orientation programs. On the otherhand, O'Banion (1969) reported favorable student response to an orientation program that was individually goal-oriented. Kopeck (1971) also found that three different orientation programs resulted in statistically significant increases in students' grade point average (GPA) as well as in their level of knowledge about their campus. Blimeline and New (1975) found that

counselor-student contact was significantly affected by a college orientation course.

The purpose of this investigation was to determine the effects of Bronx Community College's (BCC) freshman orientation courses, SPD-99 and OCD-01, upon the mean cumulative GPA and retention rate of entering freshmen. As a unit of the City University of New York, the College has maintained an open admissions policy since 1970. Ninety to 95% of its student body consists of members of minority groups, primarily Black and Hispanic. Approximately 65% of the student body is female. Entering freshmen typically have a mean age of approximately 26. Usually, 80% or more of the freshmen are required to take one or more remedial courses.

Registration and attendance records indicated that BCC enrolled 1,543 entering freshman during the Fall, 1981 semester. Of these, 195 students (13%) attended SPD-99, the College's former freshman orientation program, five or more times; 266 students (17%) attended one to four times, and 1,082 students (70%) did not attend at all.

Similarly, registration and attendance records indicated that the College enrolled 1,532 entering freshmen during the Fall, 1982 semester. Of these, 732 students (48%) attended OCD-01, the College's present freshman orientation program, seven or more times; 122 students (8%) attended one

to six times, and 678 students (44%) did not attend at all.

SPD-99 and DCD-D1 were similar in a number of ways, including the following:

- (1) In either case, one counselor functioned as instructor for the class sections assigned to him/her;
- (2) Class time was spent in activities designed to assist students with their educational, career, and personal development;
- (3) Students were introduced to various campus resources and support services;
- (4) Every student, in both formats, met individually with his/her counselor-instructor, during the term, for academic advisement as well as for career and personal counseling.

SPD-99 and OCD-D1 were dissimilar in a number of ways, including the following:

- (1) SPD-99 consisted of one hour sessions, held once a week for 10 weeks, and did not bear any credit weight. DCD-D1, on the otherhand, consisted of one hour sessions, held once a week for 14 weeks, and was offered for one credit weight;
- (2) In SPD-99 sessions, instructional materials, developed by individual counselors, were used in a variety of ways by different counselors. Grade policies, graduation and curricula requirements, registration procedures, and student

development support services were felt to be topics with which entering freshmen needed more than surface familiarity if they were to make appropriate educational and career decisions. Since each counselor developed his/her own lesson plans, course content was not necessarily uniform;

(3) In OCD-01, students were graded for the course on an A to F basis and were allowed no more than two absences. Those who failed to attend a session were contacted and warned before being dropped from the class;

(4) In OCD-01 sessions, a more formal structure was presented, requiring all participants to read and complete assignments and exercises within a given time frame. Consequently, the didactic approach used in OCD-01 contrasted with the more flexible method used in SPD-99.

To insure similarity of content in OCD-01 classes, a course outline was given to the counselor-instructors. They met, as a group, four times throughout the semester to review procedures and materials. While the counselor-instructors were encouraged to follow the course outline and use the distributed materials, they were also given freedom to implement their own styles and deviate from the course outline if they deemed it appropriate. Students were given class handouts from the OCD Manual (Santa Rita, 1980), the BCC College Catalog as well as College Survival (Chapman, 1981). Sessions one to three focused on getting acquainted,

setting goals for the course, and tours of College resources. In sessions four to seven, students explored motivations for college, study plans, and the College's grading policies and retention standards. Sessions eight to ten concentrated on goal-setting, time management, and coping skills relative to college survival. In the remaining sessions, students were given the opportunity to explore their values, interests, and abilities as they relate to curriculum choice and occupational goals. A final examination covering the topics presented in the course outline was administered in the 15th session.

Treatment and Control Groups

Random selection (every third student in each group) and the elimination of students for whom data were incomplete resulted in the following comparison groups (samples) based on maximum attendance vs. no attendance:

Group 1 - 64 students who attended SPD-99 five or more times;

Group 2 - 357 students who did not attend SPD-99 at all;

Group 3 - 244 students who attended OCD-01 seven or more times;

Group 4 - 226 students who did not attend OCD-01 at all.

Hypotheses

The investigators hypothesized that a freshman orientation course would positively affect the academic

performance and retention of entering freshman as measured by the students' mean GPA the semester in which they took the course and their rate of enrollment the following semester. Specifically, the following null hypotheses were made:

- I. There is no significant difference between the mean GPA's (4.0 = A), at the end of one semester, for the following groups:
 - (a) Students who attended SPD-99 five or more times (Group 1) and students who did not attend SPD-99 at all (Group 2);
 - (b) Students who attended OCD-01 seven or more times (Group 3) and students who did not attend OCD-01 at all (Group 4);
 - (c) Students who attended SPD-99 five or more times (Group 1) and students who attended OCD-01 seven or more times (Group 3).
- II. There is no significant difference between re-enrollment rates, at the end of one semester, for the following groups:
 - (a) Students who attended SPD-99 five or more times (Group 1) and students who did not attend SPD-99 at all (Group 2);
 - (b) Students who attended OCD-01 seven or more times (Group 3) and students who did not attend

OCD-01 at all (Group 4);

(c) Students who attended SPD-99 five or more times and students who attended OCD-01 seven or more times (Group 3).

Collection of the Data

Data were obtained from attendance records for SPD-99 and OCD-01 classes maintained by the Department of Student Development as well as student transcripts and registration records maintained by the Office of the Registrar.

Treatment of the Data

The data were treated by analysis of covariance, controlling for sex, age, full-time/part-time college attendance, and high school average. Analysis of covariance was employed in order to statistically adjust differences in GPA's and re-enrollment rates with respect to possible preexperimental differences among subjects in the demographic variables listed above.

Results

The null hypothesis which stated that there would be no significant difference between the mean GPA's for each of the three pairs of comparison groups was rejected. The findings indicated:

(1) The mean GPA (2.71) of Group 1 (students who attended SPD-99 five or more times) was significantly higher than the mean GPA (2.11) of Group 2 (students who did not attend SPD-99 at all) at the .01 level with an F value of .0035;

(2) The mean GPA (2.31) of Group 3 (students who attended OCD-01 seven or more times) was significantly higher than the mean GPA (1.79) of Group 4 (students who did not attend OCD-01 at all) at the .01 level with an F value of .0001;

(3) The mean GPA (2.71) of Group 1 (students who attended SPD-99 five or more times) was significantly higher than the mean GPA (2.31) of Group 3 (students who attended OCD-01 seven or more times) at the .05 level with an F value of .0142.

The null hypothesis which stated that there would be no significant difference between the re-enrollment rates for each of the three pairs of comparison groups was also rejected. The findings indicated:

(1) Group 1 (students who attended SPD-99 at least five times) had a significantly higher re-enrollment rate, 99%, than Group 2 (students who never attended SPD-99), 84%, at the .01 level with an F value of .0001;

(2) Group 3 (students who attended OCD-01 at least seven times) had a significantly higher re-enrollment rate,

90%, than Group 4 (students who never attended OCD-01), 75%, at the .01 level with an F value of .0001;

(3) Group 1 (students who attended SPD-99 at least five times) had a significantly higher re-enrollment rate, 99%, than Group 3 (students who attended OCD-01 at least seven times), 90%, at the .05 level with an F value of .0406.

Discussion

On the basis of the results presented above, it may be concluded that both SPD-99 and OCD-01 had a statistically significant positive effect upon the academic performance and retention of entering freshmen. The fact that students who completed half or more of the SPD-99 program had a significantly higher mean GPA as well as a significantly higher re-enrollment rate than students who attended half or more of the OCD-01 sessions is probably due to a stronger desire to succeed academically. Only 13% (N=195) of 1,543 entering freshmen completed half or more of the SPD-99 program in the Fall of 1981 whereas 48% (N=732) of 1,532 entering freshman completed half or more of the OCD-01 sessions in the Fall of 1982. While students were encouraged to register for SPD-99, they were not required to do so. Furthermore, no penalties were imposed for absences and no grades were assigned. Consequently, the students who completed half or more of the program tended to be those

students who strongly believed that it was important for them to be as familiar as possible with the College's resources. OCD-01, on the otherhand, was required of all students. Students who were excessively absent were debarred and given failing grades. All students were assigned a final grade. In summary, the students who completed half or more of the SPD-99 program did so because they wanted to complete it whereas many students who completed half or more of the OCD-01 sessions probably did so because they were required to attend. Furthermore, the Fall, 1981 freshman class, as a whole, appears to have been more successful academically than the Fall, 1982 freshman class. For example, the mean GPA of those students who did not attend SPD-99 was 2.11 whereas the mean GPA of those students who did not attend OCD-01 was 1.79. In addition, 84% of the students who did not attend SPD-99 re-enrolled whereas 75% of the students who did not attend OCD-01 re-enrolled.

As noted above, OCD-01 was required of all entering freshmen in the Fall of 1982. However, 44% of them never attended any sessions and 8% attended less than half the sessions. Those students who never attended any sessions had a mean GPA of only 1.79. A GPA of 2.0 is the minimum requirement for graduation. In view of the positive effect the OCD-01 program has upon students' academic performance and retention, every effort should be made to have each

entering student complete the program. Furthermore, action should be taken to bring into the program those students who did not attend any sessions during their first semester.

Recommendations for Further Research

A longitudinal study should be undertaken to determine the long-term effects of OCD-01. For example, it is important to find out whether or not students who take OCD-01 have a significantly higher graduation rate than those who do not take the course.

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