ORIENTATION PROGRAMS AND STUDENT RETENTION IN DISTANCE LEARNING: THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how orientation programs predict student retention in distance learning at the University of Cape Coast. A correlational research design was employed for the study. The target population was level-200 students in the distance education program at the university. Seven hundred and twenty-seven participants were selected from a sampling frame of 8,731. Responses of 625 out of the 727 questionnaires administered were used for analysis. The hypothesis for the study was set at $p < .05$. The findings of the study revealed that the orientation program is a significant predictor of student retention at $p < .001$.

Keywords: orientation, retention, distance education, prediction

INTRODUCTION

Retention of students has been cited as one of the greatest weaknesses in distance education (Seidman, 2012). Though there are no firm statistics, Simpson (2010) asserts that the Open University in United Kingdom's (UK) graduation rate stands at 22%, which is only about a quarter of the full-time graduation rate, which stands at 82%. Student retention has also been cited as one of the top five reasons contributing to failure of distance education programs (Rovai & Downey, 2010).

Student retention in distance learning is an interaction of institutional, personal, and social factors. From the institutional perspective, retention serves as an accountability measure of institutional effectiveness and quality (Kolodziejczyk, Pilegaard, & Østergaard, 2013; Tinto, 2006) and demonstrates the accomplishment of the institution's mission to educate and prepare students for life (Kim, Newton, Downey, & Benton, 2010). Dropouts may indicate a failure to prepare and support students, and they also create a financial debit to the institution (Johnson, 2012) and a loss in revenue from future alumni philanthropy (Hanover Research, 2014).

Nichols (2011) argues that high dropout rates may have a negative impact on students in terms of lost tuition fees and emotional distress for noncompletion. Unintended withdrawal because of academic failure or inability to cope with the demands of the educational system could also lower a student's self-confidence and self-esteem (Simpson, 2005; Street, 2010) and contribute to the inability of the student to find a steady job (Kolodziejczyk et al., 2013; Shinn & Walker, 2012).

Retaining students in institutions of higher learning is essential to a nation's development because it has an economic impact in increasing human capital (Pluhta & Penny, 2013; Tschechtelin, 2011) and increasing tax revenue for the government (Kolodziejczyk et al., 2013).

As part of the effort to find solutions to the issue of dropouts in distance learning, retention studies have increased; yet, it is often difficult for colleges and universities to decide on what is the best method to implement in order to improve their retention rates (Crisp & Mina, 2012). A number of empirical studies have attempted to address orientation programs and their influence on students' retention (Ali & Leeds, 2009; Anderson, 2011; Clay, Rowland, & Packard, 2008; Nichols, 2011; Schofield & Sackville, 2010).

Orientation programs are often organized at

colleges and universities for first-year students prior to their entry into the learning community. Heaney and Fisher (2011) believe that newly admitted students feel less self-reliant in their ability to succeed in academic settings and need additional help in developing habits favorable to academic success. Orientation programs are therefore organized to facilitate academic and social interactions, increase students' involvement, and enhance students' sense of belonging to the learning community (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Mayhew, Stipeck, & Dorow, 2011). Orientation programs are essential in helping students persist and they increase retention (Engle & Schutt, 2013). They are also the bridge between the last stages of student recruitment and the first stage of retention (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005; Shupp, 2014).

Orientation programs are geared towards introducing new students to college and university services that support their educational and personal goals, and they also assist students in gaining the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will help them adjust and make a smooth transition into the college/university community. Crede and Niehorster (2012) found that college adjustment is a good predictor of college retention.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of level-200 students on orientation programs provided to them and to investigate how their perceptions predicted retention in distance learning.

RESEARCH QUESTION/HYPOTHESIS

In order to find answers to the purpose of the study, two research questions and a research hypothesis were used to guide the study.

Research Questions

1. What are the students' perceptions of orientation programs provided at the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast?

2. How satisfied are students with the orientation programs provided at the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast?

Research Hypothesis

H0: The orientation program is not a significant predictor of student retention in distance learning at the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast.

DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite the many variables that affect retention, this study restricted itself to only orientation programs and not other factors, such as students' study behaviors, students' socioeconomic background, or work-related and family-life issues. Second, the study sampled participants from only the College of Distance Education of the University of Cape Coast.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of this study was largely informed by McGuire's (1968) Information-Processing Theory, which is one of the persuasion theories. The theory assumes that exposure to information leads to a change in attitude that subsequently leads to a change in behavior. The underlying assumption of the theory is that when people are provided with adequate or the right information, it enables them to change their behavior (or make right or reasonable decisions).

McGuire's (1968) Information-Processing Theory suggests that attitude change involves six steps, with each step being a necessary precedent to the next:

1. the persuasive message must be communicated;
2. the receiver must attend to the message;
3. the receiver must comprehend the message;
4. the receiver must yield to and be convinced by the information presented;
5. the newly adopted position must be retained; and
6. the desired behavior must take place.

McGuire further asserts that attitudes are likely to change when people receive messages that match the functions of their attitudes.

McGuire's theory was adopted for this study because it gives a good overview of how information received during orientation is processed and registered by students, and how it could be used to make decisions that can enhance their retention in the university. It is obvious that good information received during orientation programs will produce behavior in line with the message. This theory is therefore important to understanding the process of orientation in relation to student retention.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A study conducted by Ali and Leeds (2009) to examine the impact of orientation on retention of

online students at Southeastern State University revealed that 32 out of the 35 participants who attended the orientation program successfully completed their courses. The study concluded that orientation impacts students' retention. However, Ali and Leeds (2009) suggested improvements in the interaction and relationships between faculty and peers and better communication to enhance retention. Hong, Shull, and Haefner (2011) argued that when staff and students interact actively, staff is seen as a source of guidance and support. Komarraju, Musulkin and Bhattacharya (2010) believe that lack of faculty interaction can contribute to a sense of isolation and may lead to adjustment difficulties. O'Banion (2013) concluded that without the support of faculty, retention and completion initiatives would not be successful in distance learning.

Further, a comparative study on intervention for retention by Nichols (2011) at Laidlaw College Center for Distance Learning in New Zealand showed that orientation is significantly related to student retention. The study compared students' outcomes across two semesters with and without specific course retention interventions, and it investigated the reasons for students to drop out or remain across two semesters (Semester One, 2008 and Semester One, 2009). The results of the study showed an improvement for course retention of first-time students from 57% in 2008 to 81.7% in 2009 with retention interventions.

In Lipe and Waller's (2013) study in Dallas in the United States to determine whether or not differences existed in student retention levels between program-specific orientation (PSO) and general population orientation (GPO) programs at a Proprietary Institution located in North Central Texas, the results revealed that program-specific orientations had a greater positive impact on retention than general population orientations. Notwithstanding, both types of orientation were significantly related to retention.

Clay, Rowland, and Packard's (2008) study on improving undergraduate online retention through gated advisement and redundant communication revealed that retention rates for students increased over 80% for eCore courses in the summer semester of 2007 compared to 77% in the summer semester of 2003. However, the results indicated that students did not feel prepared; they were overwhelmed by the workload and needed more timely communications from instructors and other faculty members.

Finally, a study conducted by Davis (2013) on the impact of orientation programs on student success outcomes at a Rural Community College revealed that orientation programs positively impacted community college student retention rates. The findings of the study revealed that retention rates were higher for students who participated in the orientation program (M = 73%) as compared to those who did not (M = 62%). All five studies resulted in the same finding: that orientation programs increased student retention.

METHODOLOGY

The correlational research design was adopted for this study. The purpose of correlational research design is to verify relationships between or among variables and also to predict group membership. According to Creswell (2014), correlational research design is useful when a researcher is interested in investigating the degree of association between two or more variables.

The target population of the study was 13,915 level-200 students in the 2014/2015 academic year pursuing diploma programs in education and business at the CoDE. This number was made up of 12,265 Education and 1,650 Business students. The level-200 students were chosen because they could recall their experience as to how they were oriented into the university system and the influence it had on them. Also, it is at this level that a student can make genuinely informed decisions about his or her willingness to remain or drop out from school. The total population of students in the regions per the number of study centers and programs are presented in Table 1.

The sampling frame was made up of 8,731 level-200 students in four selected regions of Ghana that were purposively sampled for this study. The four selected regions were the head office region (central) and the three zoned regional capitals (Ashanti, Greater Accra, and Northern regions). These four regions were purposively selected because of their unique characteristics (as zoned regional capitals and head office) and their similarities in the characteristics of students living in the areas constituting the geographical units. Seven hundred and twenty-seven (727) participants were

Table 1. Level-200 Students per Region, Study Centers, and Program at the CoDE

Region	Study Centers per program for level-200 students		Number of students per program			
	Education	Business	Education DBE	DBF	Business	Total
Ashanti	7	2	2230	1350	180	3760
Brong Ahafo	5	1	1100	485	80	1665
Central	7	1	1425	926	300	2651
Western	3	1	665	375	280	1320
Greater Accra	4	2	790	645	515	1950
Eastern	3	1	400	340	100	840
Volta	3	1	305	207	55	567
Northern	2	1	270	50	50	370
Upper East	1	1	280	130	50	460
Upper West	2	1	220	72	40	332

Source: CoDE Student Support Unit, 2015.

Table 2. Student Participants Selected from the Four Regions

Region	Population	Relative Frequency (*rf*) %	*rf*x727 (sample)
Ashanti	3760	43	313
Central	2651	31	225
Greater Accra	1950	22	260
Northern	370	4	29
Total	8731	100	727

sampled from the sampling frame based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table using a 95% Confidence Interval with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5%.

The multistage sampling technique was used in selecting study centers and participants from the four regions. First, the simple random sampling (hat and draw method) and the purposive sampling techniques were employed to select 12 study centers from the 22 study centers that offered programs for level-200 students in the selected regional capitals. Study centers that offered business programs solely were purposively selected for the study.

For instance, the Ashanti region had eight study centers that offered programs for level-200 Education and Business students. Out of the eight, only one offered a Business program. The Business study center was purposively selected. The simple random sampling was used to select three study centers that offered Education programs from the seven. Further, the Central region had seven study centers for second-year Education and Business students. One out of seven study centers offered both Education and Business programs. The Business study center was selected using the purposive sampling technique. Two out of the six study centers for Education were randomly selected.

Furthermore, the Greater Accra region had six study centers that offered programs in Education and Business at the 200 level. Out of the six study centers, one offered programs in both Education and Business for second-year students. The study center for Business program was purposively selected. Simple random sampling was used to

Table 3. Student Participants Selected from the Twelve Study Centers					
Region	**Study Center**	**Programs**			**Total**
		Education	**DBE**	**DPF**	
		SAM	**SAM**	**SAM**	
Ashanti	A1			38	38
	A2	88			88
	A3	87	44		131
	A4		56		56
Central	C1	66	42	27	135
	C2	30	15		45
	C3	30	15		45
Greater Accra	G1	50			50
	G2	40	21	19	80
	G3		30		30
Northern	N1			4	4
	N2	16	9		25
Total	12	407	232	88	727

Table 4. Student Participants Selected per Program from the Four Regions				
Region	**Sample Size**	**Program Education %**		**Program Business %**
		DBE (56)	**DPF (32)**	**(12)**
Ashanti	313	175	100	38
Central	225	126	72	27
Greater Accra	160	90	51	19
Northern	29	16	9	4
Total	727	407	232	88

select two of the Education study centers.

Lastly, the Northern region had three study centers. One of the study centers was solely for Business. This study center was purposively selected and a simple random sampling was used to select the two other education study centers in the region. All the simple random sampling was done using the hat and draw method. This was to give each study center an equal chance of being selected. In sum, 12 study centers were sampled for the study.

The proportionate-to-size sampling technique was used to determine the percentage of students in their second year (Education and Business students) from the total population. This revealed that 88% of the students were in Education. This number was made up of 56% of students pursuing a Diploma in Basic Education (DBE) and 32% of students pursuing a Diploma in Psychology and Foundations of Education (DPF). The remaining 12% were in Business. The percentage of students in the sampling frame was calculated to determine the percentage in each region using cumulative frequencies. The results revealed that 43% of the participants were in Ashanti, 31% in the Central, 22% in the Greater Accra, and 4% in the Northern regions. The results are presented in Table 2.

Further, the stratified random sampling procedure was used to sample participants from each of the programs from the various study centers sampled for the study. Then the simple random sampling technique was used to select participants from each subgroup at the various study centers. The simple random sampling technique was used because face-to-face tutorial was not compulsory, and as such, there was the

probability that some students selected through the systematic random sampling method might not be in class. It was also to ensure that each student had an equal opportunity of being selected. Details of the sampling techniques are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The main instrument for data collection was a researcher-made questionnaire. The questionnaire was structured under two main sections. Section "A" sought information on students' perception of orientation programs offered at the CoDE and their level of satisfaction with the program. This section of the questionnaire consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions. A five-point Likert scale made up of seven items was used to solicit information on students' perception of orientation provided at the CoDE, and a question was used to find information on how satisfied students were with the orientation program. Section "B" of the questionnaire consisted of Binary Likert items of 0 (true of me) and 1 (not true of me). The binary Likert scale was measured using ten items to measure students' intention to remain in school.

The instrument for data collection was deemed appropriate for the study because it was purposively subjected to pilot testing in one of the regions that was not sampled for the study. The sample size for the pilot test was 73 second-year students from Education (n = 58) and Business (n = 15). The determination of the sample size was based on Connelly's (2008) sample size for pilot study. Connelly states that a pilot study sample should be 10% of the projected size of the larger parent study. It was a test-retest study. Reliability testing for internal consistency of the Likert items was performed through a calculation of Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The values of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the internal consistency per each subscale for the two pilot tests are depicted in Table 5.

The results in Table 5 show that all of the coefficients of the two subscales were above 0.7. According to Streiner (2003), results above 0.7 are reliable and hence the instrument was used to collect the data.

Data Collection

All copies of the questionnaire were administered and collected on separate days at each study center. However, to minimize or eliminate the issue of missing data or nonresponse, the researcher, study center coordinators, and the research assistant went through the data collected, and respondents were made to fill in blank spaces (if they were not intentional). This was done to verify participants' responses and not to pressure them. At the end of the data collection, a total of 625 completed copies of the questionnaire were collected out of the 727 that were distributed, yielding an 86% response rate. According to Fincham (2008) at least 60% response rate is acceptable.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the scores of students' perceptions of the orientation program were constructed by taking the sum of the observed items that made up the Likert-type scale. The perception of students of orientation was measured using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). There were seven items in the Likert scale and the maximum score was 5 x 7 = 35, while the minimum score was 1 x 7 = 7. Then a question was asked to assess students' overall satisfaction with the orientation program. The responses to this question were rated under "very satisfied" = 3, "satisfied" = 2 and "not satisfied" = 1.

Students' intention to stay in school was measured using ten items in a binary Likert-type scale. All statements were worded in the negative, and an agreement with a statement was coded "0" and a disagreement with the statement was coded "1." The highest score a respondent could

Table 5. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient

Variable	Coefficient (T1)	Coefficient (T2)
Orientation Program	.76	.79
	11	
Students Intention to Stay in School	.79	.9

Key: T1 = Test 1, T2 = Test 2

obtain was 1 x 10 = 10 (meaning the respondent has a high probability of remaining in the program until graduation) and the lowest score was 0 x 10 = 0 (meaning the respondent has a high probability of dropping out of the program).

Subsequently, to establish the association between the orientation program and student retention, the Likert scale measuring students' perception of orientation was subjected to recoding of their original scores to categorical variables as 0 = negative and 1 = positive. A respondent who had a total mean score ($M \leq 3$) was classified as having negative perception and a respondent who had a total mean score ($M > 3.1$) was classified as having positive perception. The recoding of the ordinal variables into nominal variables was used to establish the relationship between the two variables (orientation program and retention of students) using tetrachoric correlation coefficient. The tetrachoric correlation coefficient was used because the two variables were artificial binary variables. The logistic regression was used afterwards to determine the strength of the relationship between the variables and to predict group membership of participants (intention to stay in school or not to stay in school).

To predict group membership, the scores on the retention of students were computed and recategorized into two groups. Respondents who had a total retention value score of 5.0 or more on the student retention scale were categorized as having a high probability of staying in the program and respondents who had a retention value score less than 5.0 were categorized as having a higher probability of dropping out of the program. The test calculations were performed using SPSS version 21. An alpha level of .05 was set for hypothesis testing. Quantitative data after the analyses were presented in tabular forms.

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT VIRTUAL MENTORING

From the findings above some factors appear to be central in the design and provision of virtual PLD. The authors highlight and discuss these factors briefly in the following section.

Logistical And Ethical Considerations

One research assistant and the study center coordinators at each of the study centers were trained to assist in the distribution and collection of the questionnaire. The researcher gave due consideration to the ethical framework governing the conduct of this research. All participants were assured of their anonymity and that any information provided would be used for the purpose of the study only. Participants were also assured that any information that would identify them (such as names of their study centers) would not be included in the study. The names of the study centers were written as pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Participation in the research was voluntary and participants were free to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time with no consequence. In addition, anything that infringed on their right as participants was avoided. Informed consent was sought from each participant before the research instrument was administered.

RESULTS

Research Question One aimed at determining the perception by participants of the orientation program provided at the CoDE. However, the first task was to seek responses from participants to find out if they had participated in any orientation program at the university. Five hundred and seventy eight Out of the 625 copies of the questionnaire retrieved from participants, 578 responded "Yes" to the question. This means that 47 of the participants did not take part in any orientation program at the university. The results of students' perception on orientation program are depicted in Table 6.

The results in Table 6 show that most of the items measuring students' perception of the orientation program were positively scored with the exception of item 5 (I was able to interact with staff from the institution), which recorded the lowest score of ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.36$). This shows a negative perception and implies that most of the respondents did not get the opportunity to interact with staff from the institution. Notwithstanding, most items measuring students' perception of the orientation recorded a high score with item 1 (information received during the orientation service fully prepared me for the program) recording the highest score of ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.02$). This implies that the majority of the respondents had a positive perception of the orientation program offered at the CoDE.

The result for the overall student perception of the orientation program was calculated by adding the recoded values for all seven items that made up

Table 6. Respondent Perception of Orientation Program							
Perception	**SD**	**D**	**U**	**A**	**SA**	**M**	**SD**
	F(%)	**F(%)**	**F(%)**	**F(%)**	**F(%)**		
1. Information received during the orientation service fully prepared me for this program	31 (5.4)	33 (5.7)	43 (7.4)	319 (55.2)	152 (26.3)	3.91	1.02
2. Skills needed for my success on this program were clarified to me during orientation.	26 (4.5)	53 (9.2)	34 (5.9)	346 (59.9)	119 (20.5)	3.83	1.00
3. Information on what it takes to be a distance learner was clarified to me during orientation.	44 (7.6)	73 (12.6)	45 (7.8)	301 (52.1)	115 (19.9)	3.64	1.16
4. I was given tips on how to study and manage my time well during orientation.	4.2 (7.3)	63 (10.9)	32 (5.5)	300 (51.9))	141 (24.4)	3.75	1.15
5. I was able to interact with staff from the institution.	147 (25.4)	170 (29.4)	42 (7.3)	166 (28.7)	53 (9.2)	2.67	1.36
6. I really liked the way the orientation was organized.	75 (13.0)	111 (19.2)	48 (8.3)	257 (44.5)	87 (15.0)	3.29	1.29
7. The orientation service really helped me to adjust on the program	27 (4.7)	61 (10.5)	45 (7.8)	321 (55.5)	124 (21.5)	3.79	1.04
Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, U = Undecided, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree, M = Mean, and SD = Standard Deviation.							

the Likert-type scale. The most positive perception was 5 and most negative perception was 1. The overall students' perception of the orientation program yielded a score of (M = 4.84, SD = 2.04). This shows that respondents had a positive perception of the orientation programs provided at the CoDE.

The second research question was to assess the respondents' overall satisfaction with the orientation program. The results are presented in Table 7.

The results in Table 7 show that a majority of the respondents (60.6%) were satisfied and (14.4%) were very satisfied with the orientation program.

To be amenable for inferential statistical analysis, the scores on retention of students were computed and recategorized into two groups. The distribution is presented in Table 8.

The distribution in Table 8 shows that the majority of the respondents (81%) had a higher probability of staying in the program.

The test of correlation revealed $r(576) = .11$, $p = .01$. The level of significance obtained from the correlation coefficient between the two variables was less than the .05 level of significance at which the test was performed. This therefore meant that the relationship between the orientation program and the retention of students was significant. However, the coefficient of correlation between the orientation program and student retention was .11, which indicates that the two variables were weakly correlated.

To investigate if an orientation program predicts retention of students in distance learning, the null hypothesis was used.

H0: Orientation program is not a significant predictor of retention of students in distance learning.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to predict retention of students in distance learning using the orientation program as the predictor. A test of the full model against a constant-only model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictor reliably distinguished between students' retention and their nonretention $\chi 2$ ($df = 1$, $n = 578$) $= 11.06$, $p < .01$, with an overall prediction success

Table 7. Respondents' Rate of Satisfaction with the Orientation Program		
Response	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Very satisfied	83	14.4
Satisfied	350	60.6
Not satisfied	145	25
Total	578	100

Table 8. Respondents Intentions to Stay in School				
Statement	**Groups**	**Category**	**N**	**Percent**
Students' intention to stay in school	Group 1	< 5.0	116	19
	Group 2	≥ 5.0	509	81
	Total		625	100

Table 9. Logistic Regression Predicting Respondents' Intention to Stay in the Distance Learning Program from the Orientation Program				
Predictor	**B**	**Wald *x*2**	**p**	**Odds Ratio**
Orientation Program	.79	11.56	.001	2.19
Constant	.93	24.28	.000	2.54

rate of 81.7%. Nagelkerke's R2 of .03 indicates a fairly weak relationship between prediction and the grouping. In this model, there was only one predictor, so there is one degree of freedom and the sample size. The p-value, which is compared to a critical value of .05 to determine if the overall model is statistically significant, is .01, so it shows that the model is statistically significant.

Table 9 presents the logistic regression coefficient, Wald test, and odds ratio for the predictor variable (orientation program).

At an alpha level of .05, the orientation program made a significant contribution to predicting retention ($p < .001$). This implies that the orientation program is a significant predictor of retention of students in distance learning. The results therefore failed to support the null hypothesis.

The odds for the orientation program show that a student who had a positive perception of the orientation program is 5.57 times more likely to stay in the program than a student who has a negative perception. For a student who had a negative perception, the odds are 2.54 times more likely to stay in the program. The odds ratio for the orientation program as predicted by the model is 5.57/2.54 = 2.19. The probability that a student who had a positive perception towards the orientation program will stay in the program is .85 and that of a student who had a negative perception towards the orientation program to stay in the program is .72.

DISCUSSION

Findings from the two research questions show that respondents had a positive perception towards the orientation program provided by the university. The overall respondents' perception and students' level of satisfactions towards the orientation program show that the way and manner the service was provided to some extent was of a good quality to students. However, some of the respondents stated that they were unable to interact with staff from the institution. This interaction needs to be enhanced because individual psychological strengths and good relations with others in any institution are important protective factors that enhance one's transition in the institution. When staff has regular contact with students, they serve as advisors, set expectations, and assess student progress.

This finding was in agreement with findings from Ali and Leeds (2009) and Clay, Rowland, and Packard (2008), where participants believed that their interactions with staff were minimal. Hong,

Shull, and Haefner (2011) believe that when staff and students interact actively, staff is seen as a source of guidance and support. Further, if staff and student interactions are strengthened, it can help reduce the problem of isolation as the College of Distance Education is primarily a commuter college.

The test of correlation also shows that the orientation program is significantly related to retention of students in distance learning. This finding was in agreement with findings from studies conducted by Ali and Leeds (2009), Davis (2013), Lipe and Waller (2013), and Nichols (2011), who found that orientation programs significantly relate to retention of students in distance learning.

The findings were also similar to that of Nichols (2011), where respondents' satisfaction with the orientation program was very high. This high or very satisfied response by respondents may be due to the fact that they have been able to adjust well to the learning environment through the orientation program.

The findings from this study and that of other studies revealed that the orientation program is a statistically significant predictor of student retention in distance learning, even in different contexts. Most of the studies reviewed were conducted within Western cultures, and the respondents were mainly online students. The findings of this study conducted at a print based, or face-to-face, traditional learning institution was also statistically significant. This shows that the orientation program plays a central role in retaining students. The odds for the orientation program also showed that a one point increase in the orientation program will increase student retention by a factor of 2.19.

CONCLUSION

Relying on McGuire's Information-Processing Theory, exposure to information is a good overview of an attitudinal change process, which leads to a change in attitude and behavior. Although students were satisfied with the orientation program, it is important to strengthen staff and student contact because staff have the ability to influence student retention positively. Further, to accomplish orientation goals and for orientation to have a more positive impact on retention, it is imperative that orientation be considered a comprehensive, continuous process rather than a single event at the university.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the conclusions drawn from the findings, this study recommends that orientation programs provided to students at the College of Distance Education should be organized in such a manner that they will provide students an opportunity to have and maintain meaningful relationships with staff. This will help increase students' sense of connectedness and integration into the institution, which can enhance their retention. Further, the university should support the interest of students' retention through a continuous orientation process from the beginning of admission throughout the entire first year.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The focus of this study has been primarily on how orientation programs relate to student retention, and as such it did not compare different groups (Education and Business students) in the study.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research should explore the relationship between staff interactions and student retention in distance learning at the university, and this could be done through a comparative approach.

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