Part I – Overview of New Student Orientation

New Student Orientation (NSO) is a program that many colleges offer to students prior to the start of their first semester. NSO can have various purposes, which may include welcoming students to the college, introducing them to its resources, and assisting them with course selection. NSO is often one of many programs designed to improve the First Year Experience (FYE) of students at a college.

Value to Student Success

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count (ATD) is a national initiative dedicated to helping community colleges improve the success of their students, particularly low income students and students of color. ATD aims to help more students progress from developmental to college-credit courses, pass initial college-level gatekeeper courses, persist from semester to semester, and graduate with associate degrees or certificates. Since 2004, over 100 community colleges in 22 states have joined the initiative.i When a community college joins the ATD initiative, they consider data and input from faculty, staff, and students and then choose and implement strategies that will help to increase their students’ success.

Offering NSO is one strategy that many community colleges in the ATD initiative are using to improve students’ FYE. Improving students’ FYE can increase their engagement and success. Other FYE strategies that ATD institutions are using include: enhancing advising to include early alert systems for struggling students, implementing student success courses that can be made mandatory for new or developmental education students, improving teaching and learning by implementing learning communities or individual learning plans, and providing professional development for faculty and staff that focuses on the needs of new students.ii

Retention is one of the primary measures of student success that orientation can affect. Participation in an orientation can improve students’ retention through various means. One reason colleges have orientation is to help students realize what they will need to do to succeed in community college, which will help them have a more positive first semester and make them more likely to return in following semesters.iii Colleges can also use orientation to share information about academic and social services so that students can go to these programs when they are having challenges, which will help their development and therefore improve retention.iv
Achieving the Dream Institutions

Eight of the 27 first round ATD institutions implemented NSO as a FYE strategy as of Spring 2006. Strategies that ATD institutions have implemented related to NSO include: requiring participation in NSO, including advising and registration as part of NSO, offering sessions tailored to particular subgroups, and designing programs for students not entering directly from high school.

One early ATD institution that implemented NSO as an ATD strategy was Guilford Technical Community College. When the college joined the ATD initiative, they revised their NSO into a program called SOAR (Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration). SOAR provides new students with information about the college and its resources, strategies for succeeding academically, advising, and registration. The four hour session is offered over three months in the summer and one month in the winter. It is jointly run by Educational Support Services staff and faculty. Although the program is not mandatory, approximately two-thirds of all new students attended in 2008. Results have been positive. SOAR attendees had higher persistence rates from first semester to second semester than new students who did not attend the program (79% vs. 60%). SOAR attendees continued to have higher retention rates at the second fall semester (56% vs. 41%) and at the third fall semester (35% vs. 25%).

Part II – New Student Orientation at NOVA: Past to Present

NSO has been through several phases of development at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). In the past, different variations of student orientation were implemented by each campus. After NOVA joined the ATD initiative, it piloted new versions of NSO that were later standardized across campuses. Early student success data from the revised NSO is promising.

Joining Achieving the Dream

In 2007, NOVA became a participating institution in the ATD initiative. NOVA adopted NSO as one of its two ATD interventions along with Learning Communities. NSO was implemented as the first stage of a focus on improving the FYE of NOVA students.

The purpose of NSO at NOVA is to provide students with a sense of identity, community, and connectedness and to provide them with basic knowledge needed to start their studies. The goal of NSO at NOVA is to improve student enrollment, retention, and success rates.

Summer 2008

In Summer 2008, NOVA piloted versions of NSO at each of its campuses. To market NSO, NOVA sent letters to all its applicants and to recent high school graduates in its service area, conducted high school outreach, and posted information on its website. Students were asked to submit their NOVA application and to take the English and Math placement tests prior to attending NSO.

Information provided at NSO included an overview of NOVA’s mission, resources, student support services, co-curricular activities, physical layout, and facilities.

There were 2,041 students who attended NSO in Summer 2008 and, of these students, 1,510 (74%) initially enrolled at NOVA in Fall 2008. Of the NSO attendees, 1,489 (73%) students remained enrolled throughout the semester. Ninety-five percent of the NSO attendees who enrolled were under 18 or between 18-21 years old. The race/ethnicity of NSO attendees who enrolled was White (45%), Hispanic (19%), Asian (16%), Black (13%), and Native American
A majority of NSO attendees enrolled as full-time time (73%) rather than part-time students (27%).

**Summer 2009**

During Summer 2009, NOVA standardized NSO across its campuses with common publicity, format, timeframes, content, handouts, and evaluations. First-time students were encouraged but not required to attend. Over 40 sessions, four and a half hours in length, were offered from June to August. Students were asked to bring their placement test results with them to NSO.

During NSO, students and their parents were provided information about NOVA’s resources, degree and certificate programs, transfer agreements, financial aid, success skills, course selection, and online registration. The agenda included: a resource fair, welcoming remarks, a student/parent conference, breakout sessions including time for advising and registration, lunch, identification cards and parking permits, and an optional tour of the campus.

In total, 2,151 students attended NSO sessions in Summer 2009 and, of these students, 1,853 (86%) initially enrolled at NOVA in Fall 2009. Of the NSO attendees, 1,755 (82%) students remained enrolled throughout the semester. Most NSO attendees who enrolled (94%) were under 18 or between 18-21 years old. The race/ethnicity of NSO attendees who enrolled was White (44%), Black (20%), Hispanic (18%), Asian (12%), and Native American (1%). A majority of NSO attendees enrolled as full-time (75%) rather than part-time students (25%).

**Student Success Data**

There are early indications that the NSO strategy is paying off at NOVA. Student success data for students who enrolled at NOVA after attending NSO is generally more positive than for first-time students who did not attend NSO. Data about GPA and retention from 2008 and 2009, both overall and by demographics, show this pattern.

**GPA**

Students who attended NSO in Summer 2009 earned a higher GPA (2.21) than first-time NOVA students who did not attend NSO (2.11) as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Enrolled</th>
<th>Average GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSO Attendees</td>
<td>1,755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All First-Time Students excluding NSO Attendees</td>
<td>11,579</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NSO attendees between 18-21 years old had higher GPAs (2.14) than first time students who did not attend NSO (2.02). NSO attendees under 18 years old had nearly equal GPAs (2.22) to non-attendees (2.23). Results were mixed when comparing GPAs of first-time students by race/ethnicity. On average, Asian NSO attendees had higher GPAs than non-attendees (2.45 vs. 2.27), as did Hispanic attendees (2.16 vs. 1.90) and Native American attendees (2.66 vs. 1.89). On average, White NSO attendees had lower GPAs than non-attendees (2.32 vs. 2.47) as did Black attendees (1.81 vs. 1.86).

Results were similarly positive for students who attended NSO in Summer 2008. Students who attended NSO earned a higher GPA (2.2) than all first-time NOVA students (2.1).
Retention

Students who attended NSO in Summer 2009 returned to NOVA in Spring 2010 at a greater rate (87%) than first-time NOVA students who did not attend NSO (68%) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Retention Rates: Fall 2009 to Spring 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># Enrolled</th>
<th># Returned</th>
<th>Retention Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSO Attendees</td>
<td>1,755</td>
<td>1,519</td>
<td>86.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All First-Time</td>
<td>11,579</td>
<td>7,840</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students excluding NSO Attendees</td>
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</table>

Students under 18 years old who attended NSO returned at a higher rate (87.6%) than those who did not attend (80.5%). This is similarly true for students between 18-21 years old (86.1% vs. 71.7%). Students in every racial/ethnic group who attended NSO returned at a higher rate than those who did not attend: White (86.1% vs. 65.8%), Black (81.0% vs. 68.0%), Asian (94.1% vs. 76.1%), Hispanic (86.0% vs. 70.6%), and Native American (100% vs. 60.4%).

Again, similar positive results were achieved in Summer 2008. Students who attended NSO returned to NOVA in Spring 2009 at a greater rate (85.7%) than all first-time NOVA students (67.8%).

Part III – New Student Orientation at NOVA: Moving Forward

NOVA will continue to refine NSO using lessons learned, previous years’ data, and student learning outcomes. Some lessons learned from NSO in Summer 2009 include: there is a need for consistent communication and delivery format across campuses; the sessions were too large to advise all students who attended; there was not enough time to provide students with information about all the college’s resources; there was low attendance at some sessions; and some students registered earlier without attending NSO.

Revised Format for Summer 2010

Plans for NSO in Summer 2010 include implementing new strategies to address many of these lessons learned. The format will be revised to have two parts: Part I will focus on advising and planning and Part II will focus on student engagement.

Advising and Planning Sessions

Part I will be a one and a half hour long “Advising and Planning Session” offered for 12 weeks from June to August. Sessions will be limited to 20-35 students and be led by one to two counselors. Each campus will establish a schedule of sessions based on their new student enrollment projections and post the schedule ahead of time on the NOVA website. The agenda includes an interactive presentation, advising, a financial aid presentation, and time to register using NOVA’s online registration system. Students will also receive an Advising Guidebook.

The Advising and Planning sessions will concentrate on course selection. The sessions will help students understand how to use resources to understand degree requirements and programs of study, scheduling options and the registration process, and resources available to support their success. The sessions will also highlight the importance of connecting with faculty advisors and counselors and enrolling in a Student Development course during the first semester.

New Student Orientation Sessions
Part II will be a three hour and fifteen minute “New Student Orientation” held in late July and August. Sessions will be limited in size to 150 students. The agenda includes a resource fair, welcoming remarks by the campus Provost and Dean of Students, breakout sessions on various topics such as student expectations and campus involvement, refreshments, and an evaluation.

The NSO sessions will concentrate on student engagement. The sessions will provide information about and encouragement to participate in co-curricular activities, connection to college resources, opportunities to interact with peers and faculty/staff, and skills for navigating the campus.

Benefits

The benefits of the revised NSO are that its two-session format will start a continuum of services supporting students’ success by outreaching to them earlier. Additionally, Advising and Planning Sessions will standardize NSO advising on each campus and provide additional time for advising and registration. New Student Orientation Sessions will incorporate student engagement while providing some flexibility in breakout session topics for each campus.

Conclusion

As part of the ATD initiative, NOVA has seen improved student success through revisions to its NSO. In the first two years, there have been signs that, in general, students who attend NSO have higher GPAs and higher retention than those who do not attend. Moving forward, NOVA will continue to identify and implement best practices in NSO from other institutions and from lessons learned internally in the hopes of continuing to improve its success outcomes for its new students.

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