

207 More than food and fun: a systematic review of higher education orientation programs

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Abstract

Orientation and transition programs are intended to introduce a student to their university environment, physical and cultural, and traditional include key elements. Despite this, there has not been comprehensive sector-wide consideration on the impact of these programs on student's wellbeing and academic outcomes at university. Therefore, we undertook a rigorous systematic literature review of orientation programs and their impacts to provide universities with a clearer understanding about what elements would support a student's positive wellbeing and academic outcomes.

Full paper

Introduction

For almost as long as university orientations have been standard practice, there has been questions regarding the value of such practices (for example: Chandler, 1972; Grier, 1966). In spite of this, orientations are run at higher education institutions around the world and are considered a fundamental event to support student's transition into the institutions community. Over the years, researchers and practitioners have highlighted the importance of participating in orientation, with impacts on retention (Krause et al., 2005), wellbeing (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), engagement with the university (Kift, 2009; Krause & Coates, 2008; Tinto, 1994), and successful completion of a degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There appears to be consensus that orientation activities are indeed worthwhile for institutions to spend the time and money to run.

Previous researchers have indicated the value of orientation programs, bringing together theory, best practice, and research examples to support practitioners and researchers alike understand and support first year students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft et al., 2005) and are considered foundational documents. Included in Upcraft et al. (2005) is a study that was undertaken to understand how higher education institutions in the US organise, structure and evaluate the curricular and cocurricular elements of first year (Barefoot, 2005). This includes consideration for the orientation programming and noted that while most institutions conduct evaluations, insufficient information was found on the methods, and outcomes. Ultimately, many institutions were utilising measures of satisfaction as the basis of their program evaluation. Another chapter in Upcraft et al. (2005) recommends best practice considerations when designing orientation programs (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). Even with these seminal documents, there appears a lack of consensus regarding which elements of orientation, including timing, length, and inclusions, have the greatest potential for impact.

Undertaking a systematic approach, this study seeks to synthesis key elements from 139 documents evaluating undergraduate orientation programs from the United States of America, Australia and the United Kingdom to gain a broader understanding of the overall effectiveness of orientation programs. Through this, I attempt to gain a clearer understanding of the intention of these programs, how they are evaluated, and determine if there are potential links between key program elements and outcomes, which could be recommended for inclusion in orientation programs more broadly. This paper also seeks to be of use to future researchers and practitioners, by identifying and synthesising key research to assist in identifying key priorities for future research.

Method

To identify existing evaluations, I conducted a systematic search informed by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). This process of review was undertaken with the intent to provide a comprehensive analysis of orientation evaluations across a key section of the higher education sector. There has been increased recognition of the value of utilising the systematic review process as a research process within higher education (Bearman et al., 2012), with a number of systematic reviews and meta-analysis emerging in recent years (Berry, 2014; Franzoi et al., 2022; Matus et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2016; Tight, 2020; van der Zanden et al., 2018; Younger et al., 2019).

The intent of this review was to identify empirical, quantitative examinations that investigated the outcomes and impacts of orientation programs. To be included in this review, documents had to report quantitatively measured impacts of higher education orientation programs, located within the US, Australia and the UK. Quantitative studies were selected as we need to move beyond participation numbers and satisfaction ratings and consider tangible impact. This will ensure we can demonstrate the value of these programs to students and institutions alike.

Additionally, documents were from 2000 onwards due to changes across the sector in relation to technological, social and economic changes that have influenced participation in higher education (Baik et al., 2015; Mullendore & Banahan, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These changes have resulted in government led policies intent on increasing participation, particular for students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education (Australia. Department of Employment & Training, 1990; Gale & Parker, 2013; Thomas, 2017; Wood & Breyer, 2017).

Results and discussion

The analysis of this systematic review is still underway but will be finalised prior to the conference. This analysis seeks to answer the following questions: what is the intention of orientation programs; what is included in said programs; what is being measured; and how long does participation have an impact.

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