FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

An Achieving the Dream Pilot Project

Fall Semester, 2006

Results and Conclusions

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Conclusions

- The purpose of this pilot project was to study the effects of different Orientation interventions on student outcomes. Data do not show any significant differences among the Control and two Experimental Orientation groups for the semester GPAs, retention rates or success rates. The Student Advocate group did have a significantly higher course grade than the two other groups.

- Orientation instructors using the Revised Curriculum intervention recommended that three of the four changes they implemented be continued in all future Orientation sections.

- The Student Advocate intervention was implemented with little time for training and no testing of procedures. This resulted in incomplete information being provided to the Service Providers regarding students' needs and students for the most part did not respond to the Service Providers when contacted.

- The STARS electronic system used to facilitate referrals between the Student Advocates and the Service Providers was generally felt to be useful for time management, especially regarding documentation of services provided to students or attempts to contact them.

- In a comparison of student outcomes between Orientation and Non-Orientation Fall 2006 students, there were significant differences; however, this difference was not found when the data were disaggregated by full-time and part-time status. Only 15% of the part-time students took Orientation, compared to 59% of the full-time students.

- A comparison was made of full-time, Orientation and Non-Orientation students for the past five years to determine if the Fall 2006 cohort was representative. The completion rates for the Fall 2002 and 2003 cohorts were available and added as an outcome. Greater differences were found between the Orientation and Non-Orientation groups in previous years than in Fall 06. Overall, the Orientation students performed at a higher level than the Non-Orientation students.

- Within the five years of data (Fall 02 – Fall 06), the outcomes for the Fall 2003 Orientation students were substantially higher than for the Non-Orientation students. Currently there is no explanation for these much higher scores for this cohort. These data are included in the five-year average of retention, success and GPA outcomes and the two-years of completion data.

- The relationship between Orientation and the gender and age of students was studied. For both males and females, those taking Orientation scored higher than the Non-Orientation groups in all outcome measures: retention, success, GPA and completion. The Non-Orientation males had the lowest scores in all of these measures.

- The 17 - 18 age group had the largest number of students taking Orientation, followed by the ages 19 - 21. (For a first-time cohort, younger students are more prevalent than older students.) The biggest difference in outcomes was between the Orientation and Non-Orientation students in the youngest group, with the Non-Orientation students having the lower scores. It appears that the first-time older students who do not take Orientation in their first semester generally perform as well as those who did take Orientation, except for the completion rate which appears to be higher for the older, Orientation students.

- Factors largely related to preparation and/or effort appear to affect student success. Dual enrollment students had a higher preparation level for college than most other students in their cohort and performed at a higher level than first-time students beginning in either the summer or fall terms. Students who put forth an effort in Orientation, as measured by their course grade, also had higher outcomes.

- As standard practice, students evaluate their Orientation classes. For fall 2006, as in past years, all Orientation classes receive high evaluations.

- Some of the results could change due to the data being quickly following the fall semester. There are incomplete grades from the fall semester and student retention may be altered by a late enrolling student or a student being backed-out for non-payment. That being said, it is unlikely that any of these changes will affect the outcomes of this study.

I. Project Overview

This project was developed from the recommendations of the 2005-06 First-Year Experience Committee, which was comprised of three subcommittees: Advising, Orientation, and Early Alert.

- One of the recommendations of the Advising Subcommittee was to provide case management (hereafter called Student Advocacy) which employs a deliberate strategy of student engagement and implements an early identification system and appropriate intervention strategies.
- The Orientation Subcommittee recommended a revised curriculum for the Orientation classes to ensure more student connections with student services, such as early contact with advisors and the Career Center.
- The Early Alert Subcommittee's recommendations included the use of a tracking system to facilitate communication among student service providers.

The First-Year Experience Committee devolved into one committee to develop and implement the First-Year Experience pilot project during the 2006-07 academic year.

Goal, Objective, and Expected Outcomes

Goal

To improve academic outcomes of first-year students as measured by GPA, retention and success. (Success is measured by students having a 2.0 or higher fall semester GPA, completing two-thirds of their credits, and being retained to spring semester.)

Objective

To identify effective interventions in Orientation for improving outcomes of first-year students.

- To determine if the Revised Curriculum and/or Student Advocacy interventions in Orientation classes improve student outcomes.
- To determine if first-semester Orientation should be mandatory for first-year students in associate degrees, one-year certificate programs or career study programs. (The 2005-06 Orientation Subcommittee wanted more data before they felt a recommendation could be made on this issue.)

Expected Outcomes

1. Students in the Revised Curriculum and/or Student Advocacy Orientation groups will have higher student outcomes when compared to the Orientation Control group.
2. Students taking Orientation in their first semester will have higher student outcomes when compared to Non-Orientation students.

Design of the Pilot Project

This project took place in the 2006 Fall semester Orientation classes. The 15 sections of the on-campus Orientation classes comprised 3 research groups:

Group 1: Control - no changes to the Orientation curriculum, 7 sections

Group 2.: Experimental – using revisions to the Orientation curriculum, 4 sections

Group 3: Experimental – using a Student Advocacy intervention, 4 sections

Group 4: Control – students not taking Orientation in their first semester provided another comparison group.

The two web sections were not part of this study.

Selection of Students

Students in this study were from the first-time student, Fall 2006 cohort. Sixty-five students in the cohort who had academic plans that did not require Orientation were excluded from this study. Also, students in the Orientation classes who were returning students were excluded form this study.

The process of student enrollment into the various Orientation sections was not changed and students did not know that some sections were experimental and some were control groups. MECC's Office of Institutional Research conducted an analysis of the fall 2005 class sections to ensure that the number of first-year students would be adequate within the three Orientation groups. (Since Orientation is not mandated the first semester, some sections have returning students.) Student profile analyses were conducted with the fall 2006 sections as enrollments occurred over the summer to check on adequate numbers of first-year students across the class sections.

Data Collection

Data were collected to measure the following:

- A comparison of the student outcomes among the four research groups.
- Feedback from the Group 2 Revised Curriculum Instructors.
- Feedback from the Student Advocates and the Service Providers participating in the Group 3 Student Advocate experiment using a survey, focus group, and report/interview to determine the time and management of this project.
- An analysis of the reports generated from a tracking system developed for the Student Advocacy research group.

II. Report on the Revised Curriculum Intervention

Fifty students who completed the four Revised Curriculum Orientation class sections comprised Group 2, which was taught by two MECC counselors who regularly teach Orientation classes. The Revised Curriculum was based upon the research and analysis of the 2005-06 Orientation Subcommittee.

As part of this pilot's evaluation, a report from the two instructors included the following curriculum recommendations for all Orientation sections:

1. Continue to require students, in class, to register with the MECC Career Center.
2. Continue to require completion of the Advisor Assignment within the first three weeks of class.
3. Continue to require a Goal Setting Exercise. Both instructors agreed that students seemed interested and attentive during this exercise.
4. Continue to have the MECC Diplomats make class presentations about college-sponsored activities and college resources. Both instructors observed that students asked more questions and appeared more engaged when the Diplomats made class presentations.

Not recommended was the continued use of the *Learning Behavior Scale. S*tudents had been encouraged to use this scale to monitor use of the college resources. The instructors determined that this was not an effective instructional method.

III. Report on the Student Advocacy Intervention

Seventy-six students completed the four Student Advocate Orientation sections comprising Group 3. These students were taught using the current curriculum (the same as taught in the Control Group sections); however, a pro-active student intervention strategy was implemented as developed by the 1st Year Experience Committee.

Student Advocates

Two Orientation instructors took on the role of Student Advocates: one adjunct faculty member who regularly teaches Orientation classes taught three sections and a full-time faculty member taught one section. As Student Advocates they identified student needs, made referrals to Service Providers and tracked and monitored the students. Appendix A provides the Student Assistance Questionnaire form that was used at the beginning of the Group 3 Orientation sections.

As part of this pilot's evaluation, a report was received from the instructors and one instructor had a follow-up interview by two members of the 1st Year Experience Committee. A summary of their reflections and recommendations are summarized below:

- The Student Advocate intervention was focused on proactively identifying student needs that could affect their success as a student.
- There was good cooperation between the Student Advocates and the Service Providers and 'exceptional assistance' from Student Services staff and Data Processing staff.
- The Student Assistance Questionnaire form provided a mechanism to identify student needs; however, the categories were too broad (students need to identify specific needs), students may have misunderstood that they 'had to identify needs," and a student release signature needs to be added for disclosure of this information to the Service Providers.
- The STARS system provided for effective time management using electronic referrals and feedback on student assistance by the Service Providers.
- There was a lack of planning time for this project, including a lack of training of the Student Advocates and Service Providers on the process and use of STARS.
- The full-time faculty member felt that the strategy called for much time commitment for entering student data into STARS and scheduling meetings with students and suggested that a full-time Advocate was needed with clerical assistance. The adjunct felt much time was required to effectively follow-up with students to determine specific needs.

Referral and Tracking System

An online database, Student Tracking And Referral System (STARS), was developed by MECC's Information Technology Director to support electronic referrals of student needs to various offices. The STARS system identified the student services available to students, along with the personnel responsible for providing these services. STARS also had a reporting feature that provided data on the use of the system.

Student Advocates could easily click on a specific student (with contact information), identify their need, and send it to the appropriate service provided. One feature of STARS was to have Open and Closed cases.

Table 1. The Distribution of Student Needs to Service Providers as Referred by the Student Advocates.

Student Support Services	Open Cases	Closed Cases	Total
Career Services	17	0	17
Distance Education	2	1	3
GAIN Services	5	58	63
Student Services	21	16	37
Financial Aid	0	14	14
Technology Services	0	6	6
TOTAL	45	95	*140

*56 students provided 140 requests

- The lack of preparation time for this project did not allow a testing of the STARS system. Service Providers were unsure when to Open or Close a case.

Service Providers

The 2006-07 First-Year Experience Committee identified all student services available to MECC students and met with the various college personnel who deliver these services. The two Student Advocates, all Service Providers, and members of the First-Year Experience Committee were provided training on the use of the STARS system.

As part of this pilot project's evaluation**,** a survey and focus group were used to gather input from the Service Providers. Six of the eight Service Providers participated in the survey and focus group.

Table 2. Survey of Service Providers Regarding the STARS System

Survey Questions	**Yes**	**No**
1. STARS is an effective system for communicating student needs between the student advocates and the Service Providers.	4	2
2. STARS is an effective system for documenting actions taken by the service providers to address student needs.	5	1
3. STARS is an efficient use of my time for receiving referrals.	2	4
4. STARS is an efficient use of my time for contacting students.	1	5
5. STARS is an efficient use of my time for documenting actions taken to address student needs.	3	3

Comments in the focus group regarding the above listed survey questions.

- Little information about students' specific needs was provided by the Student Advocates in the referrals – only the broad categories on the intake form were used. (Financial Aid had to look at each student's file to get their status before contacting the students).
- Little to no response was received from the students once contacted by Service Providers. This left some Service Providers feeling this process was a waste of their time. Students could be contacted by letter, phone or email. Most Service Providers used email.
- Using STARS to document actions taken was a feature liked by most Service Providers. The technology of STARS was positive.

IV. Report on Student Outcomes

In the 2006 Fall semester, 268 first-time students (49%) enrolled in Orientation classes and 284 first-time students (51%) did not enroll. (Sixty-five students whose plans do not require Orientation were not included in this count.)

Were there measurable outcome differences among the Orientation Control Group, the Revised Curriculum Experimental Group, the Student Advocate Experimental Group, and the Non-Orientation Control Group?

As shown in Table 3, there was little difference in the **retention rates**, **success rates** or the **semester GPAs** among the Control and Experimental groups. And, there were no discernable patterns. The Control Group had the highest retention rate, but the lowest success rate and semester GPA. The Revised Curriculum Experimental Group had the highest success rate, but the lowest retention rate. The Student Advocate Experiment Group had the highest course grade average (3.24) and the highest semester GPA average (2.37). There was a significantly higher retention rate for the Orientation Control and Student Advocate Groups compared to the Non-Orientation Control Group.

Table 3. Comparison of Performance Outcomes Among Control and Experimental Groups.

Outcomes	Control	Revised Curriculum	Student Advocate	Non-Orientation
N	103	50	76	284
Retention	0.786	0.700	0.750	0.602
Std. Dev.	0.412	0.463	0.436	0.490
Lower Bound	0.71	0.57	0.65	0.54
Upper Bound	0.87	0.83	0.85	0.66
Success	0.447	0.580	0.553	0.426
Std. Dev.	0.500	0.499	0.501	0.495
Lower Bound	0.35	0.44	0.44	0.37
Upper Bound	0.54	0.72	0.67	0.48
Semester GPA	2.16	2.20	2.37	2.26
Std. Dev.	1.408	1.429	1.322	1.485
Lower Bound	1.89	1.79	2.07	2.08
Upper Bound	2.44	2.60	2.67	2.43
Course Grade	2.72	2.56	3.24	NA
Std. Dev.	1.543	1.618	1.365	NA
Lower Bound	2.42	2.10	2.92	NA
Upper Bound	3.02	3.02	3.55	NA

The first-year cohort is comprised of first-time summer students continuing to fall, first-time fall students, and previously dual enrollment students. Since the enrollment in the Orientation sections was not random, a question was raised on the possible influence of the composition of the various Groups on the outcomes. Table 4 shows the previous dual enrollment students have higher average scores on all three outcome measures.

Table 4. Comparison of Outcomes for All Students in the 2006 Cohort.

Outcomes	First-Time Fall	Dual Enrollment	First-Time Summer
N	325	164	63
Retention	0.655	0.768	0.556
Std. Dev.	0.476	0.423	0.501
Lower Bound	0.60	0.70	0.43
Upper Bound	0.71	0.83	0.68
Success	0.452	0.512	0.429
Std. Dev.	0.498	0.501	0.499
Lower Bound	0.40	0.43	0.30
Upper Bound	0.51	0.59	0.55
Semester GPA	2.27	2.31	1.96
Std. Dev.	1.511	1.279	1.433
Lower Bound	2.11	2.12	1.59
Upper Bound	2.44	2.51	2.32

However, Table 5 shows the distribution of these three student types across the three Orientation groups was fairly consistent.

Table 5. Distribution of 2006 Cohort Students Among the Control and Experimental Groups.

Orientation Comparison Groups	First-Time Fall	Dual Enrollment	First-Time Summer
N	325	164	63
Control	64.1%	33.0%	2.9%
Revised Curriculum	66.0%	28.0%	6.0%
Student Advocate	61.8%	31.6%	6.6%
Non-Orientation	56.3%	27.1%	16.5%

Student Evaluations

Historically, students in each Orientation section provide an evaluation of their class. These standard evaluations were reviewed for the Fall 2006 semester to determine if any differences existed among the Control and Experimental Groups. All sections, as in the past, received high evaluations. It was observed that the Student Advocate sections received more written comments on the evaluations.

Orientation Course Grade and Student Outcomes

Table 6 shows a relationship between the Orientation course grade and all outcome measures, regardless of the student being in a Control or Experimental group. This was most evident for full-time students due to the low number of part-time students taking Orientation.

Table 6. Relationship of Orientation Course Grade to Outcomes.

Grade	A		B		C		D		F,I,W	
	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT
N	124	15	43	3	17	3	4	0	53	6
Retention	0.944	0.867	0.837	0.667	0.706	0.667	0.750	NA	0.302	0.333
Std. Dev.	0.232	0.352	0.374	0.577	0.470	0.470	0.500	NA	0.463	0.516
Lower Bound	0.88		0.72		0.52		0.38		0.20	
Upper Bound	1.01		0.95		0.89		1.12		0.41	
Success	0.798	0.667	0.395	0.667	0.353	0.667	0.000	NA	0.019	0.000
Std. Dev.	0.403	0.466	0.495	0.577	0.493	0.577	0.000	NA	0.137	0.000
Lower Bound	0.72		0.26		0.15		0.00		0.00	
Upper Bound	0.88		0.53		0.56		0.00		0.14	
Semester GPA	3.094	3.256	2.064	2.573	1.727	1.850	0.920	NA	0.541	0.643
Std. Dev.	0.926	0.812	0.997	1.780	1.110	0.984	0.490	NA	0.875	1.628
Lower Bound	2.89		1.72		1.18		0.00		0.23	
Upper Bound	3.30		2.41		2.27		2.04		0.85	

Full-time students receiving a grade of “F”, “I”, or “W”, had much a much lower **retention** rate (30%) than those receiving a “C” or better in Orientation. And, the retention rates decreased as the grade decreased from “A” to “C” (94%, 83%, and 70%, respectively). There were not enough students with a “D” grade to do any substantial analysis.

Full-time students who received an “A” in Orientation had the highest **success** rate. Students with a “B” or “C” grade had similar success rates, but much lower than the success rate of the “A” students. All three groups had higher success rates than those receiving an “F”, “I”, or “W”.

There was a direct relationship between the grade received in Orientation and the semester GPA, which ranged from a 3.09 GPA for full-time students receiving an “A” grade to a 0.54 GPA for students who received “F,” “I,” or “W” grades.

An interesting finding was the decrease in the retention to success rates for the full-time students who received a “B” in Orientation. The retention rate was 83.7%, but the success rate was 39.5%, a loss of 44.2 percentage points. The decreases for those who received an “A” or “C” were 14.6% and 35.3%, respectively. While the decreases were similar for those who received a “B” or “C,” the fact that success rates are based partially

on a student earning a 2.0 GPA makes the difference more striking. The average semester GPAs of students with an "A" to "C" in Orientation were 3.09, 2.06, and 1.73, respectively. Presumably, the GPA of "B" students should have been higher than it was. Further study is needed to examine why these students averaged a barely passable fall GPA.

Were there measurable outcome differences between Orientation students and Non-Orientation students?

Having found no consistent relationship between student outcomes and the type of Orientation class that students took, the next question was to determine any differences between the first-time students taking Orientation their first semester and the first-time students who did not.

This part of the study was limited to full-time students. Part-time students comprised 41% of the Non-Orientation group but only 9% of the Orientation group. Stated another way, 85% of all part-time students in the Fall 06 cohort did not take Orientation. As shown in Table 7, the part-time, Non-Orientation students had GPAs as higher or higher than full-time, Non-Orientation students, but they had the lowest retention and success rates. This indicated their part-time status influenced their not re-enrolling spring term.

Table 7. Comparison of Fall 2006 Outcomes for Full-Time and Part-Time Students Not Taking Orientation in their First Semester.

Outcomes	Full-Time	Part-Time
N	168	116
Retention	0.762	0.371
Std. Dev.	0.427	0.485
Success	0.536	0.267
Std. Dev.	0.500	0.444
Semester GPA	2.17	2.38
Std. Dev.	1.377	1.628

Full-Time Students

Data on the full-time Orientation and Non-Orientation students were gather for the previous four years, which allowed the Fall 2006 pilot year to be a sample of the five-year period. Figure 1 shows a comparison of the average, fall semester GPAs for full-time Orientation and Non-Orientation students over the past five years. In four out of the five years, the Orientation students had a higher GPA.

Figure 1. Comparison of 1st Fall Semester GPAs of Orientation and Non-Orientation Students

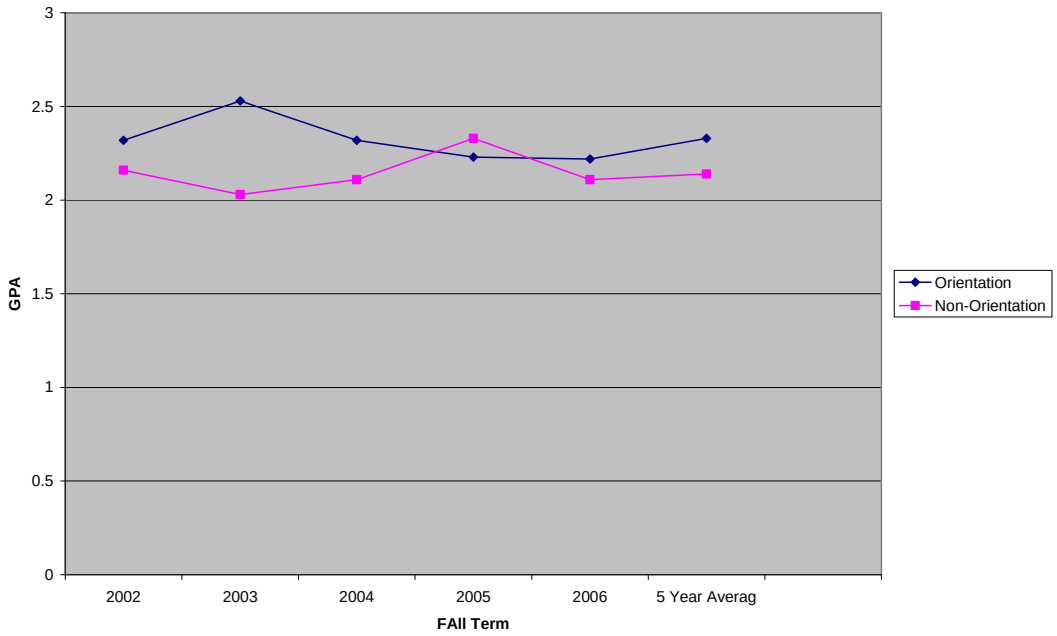
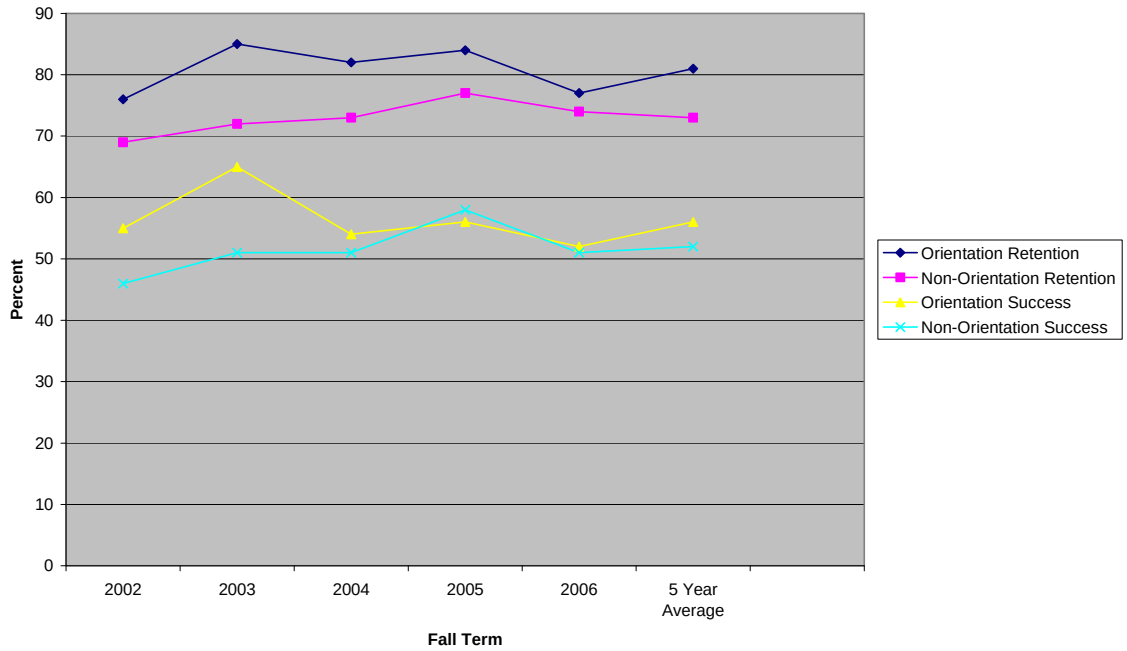


Figure 2 shows a comparison of the retention and success rates for the Orientation and Non-Orientation students. For the five-year average, Orientation students had higher rates for both outcomes, although the success rates for the past three years were basically indistinguishable.

Figure 2. Comparison of Retention and Success Rates of Full-Time Orientation and Non-Orientation Students Fall 2002 - Fall 2006



Graduation Rates

An additional outcome, graduation rates, was available for the Fall 02 and 03 cohorts (number of first-time, full-time students graduating in three years). In both years, the Orientation students had the higher graduation rate; however, this rate varied from 17% to 25% for the 02 and 03 groups, respectively, whereas the Non-Orientation students had rates of 14% for both cohorts.

Gender and Orientation

For the Fall 02 cohort, less than one-fourth of the students (22%) did not take Orientation. However, from Fall 03 to Fall 06, the percentage of students not taking Orientation rose to approximately one-third, (ranging from 30% to 36%). Further analysis was conducted to see if demographic characteristics of the students could help understand the students who were taking, or not taking, Orientation their first semester.

For the five-year average, approximately the same percentage of males (32%) and females did not take Orientation (30%). Table 8 shows that Non-Orientation males had the lowest performance for all of the outcomes.

Table 8. Comparison of Outcomes for Orientation and Non-Orientation Students by Gender Five-Year Average, Fall 2002 – Fall 2006

	Retention		Success		GPA	2-Year Completion	
Gender	**N**	**Rate**	**N**	**Rate**	**N**	**N**	**Rate**
Non-Orientation, males	184/266	0.692	132/266	0.496	1.91	11/94	0.117
Orientation, males	459/570	0.805	308/507	0.540	2.22	63/225	0.247
Non-Orientation, females	253/331	0.764	176/331	0.532	2.08	23/146	0.158
Orientation, females	633/786	0.805	456/786	0.580	2.31	57/335	0.170

Age and Orientation

Table 9 shows the outcomes by age for the five-year period. By far, the largest number of students in these first-time cohorts are 'traditional age' college students (1,534 for ages 17 – 21 compared to 419 students age 22 and older). Older students are more likely to have had previous college experience, thus less likely to fit the definition of a first-time student.

The youngest age group (17 -18) are most likely to take Orientation their first semester (only 22% did not, compared to 33% of those ages 19 -21 and 49% of those ages 22 and older). However, the largest gap between the Orientation and Non-Orientation outcomes was for this youngest group; i.e., the youngest students who do not take Orientation perform farther below their comparison group. The lowest GPAs are for those ages 24 and younger for both Orientation and Non-Orientation students when compared to older, first-time students. The highest GPA among this 'younger set' are those students coming directly from high school and taking Orientation. Older students, overall, appear to have comparable retention and success rates and first-semester GPAs regardless of whether they take Orientation. The one difference for these older students is that those taking Orientation have a higher completion rate, based on the two years of data available.

Table 9. Comparison of Outcomes for Orientation and Non-Orientation Students by Age Five-Year Average, Fall 2002 – Fall 2006

		Retention		Success			Completion	
Age		**N**	**Rate**	**N**	**Rate**	**GPA**	**N**	**Rate**
17 - 18	Non-Orientation	164/219	0.749	104/219	0.475	1.80	9/83	0.108
	Orientation	669/786	0.851	471/786	0.599	2.31	69/349	0.198
19 - 21	Non-Orientation	128/173	0.740	85/173	0.491	1.89	9/76	0.118
	Orientation	276/356	0.775	171/356	0.480	2.12	20/124	0.161
22 - 24	Non-Orientation	48/75	0.640	36/75	0.480	1.85	7/35	0.200
	Orientation	50/82	0.610	39/82	0.476	1.88	6/40	0.150
25 - 29	Non-Orientation	45/50	0.800	35/50	0.700	2.64	3/15	0.200
	Orientation	40/53	0.755	34/53	0.642	2.64	8/27	0.296
30 - 34	Non-Orientation	18/31	0.581	17/31	0.548	2.46	1/13	0.077
	Orientation	13/22	0.591	12/22	0.545	2.39	4/15	0.267
35 - 44	Non-Orientation	24/30	0.800	19/30	0.633	2.39	3/11	0.273
	Orientation	27/31	0.871	22/31	0.710	3.14	8/20	0.400
45 +	Non-Orientation	15/19	0.789	12/19	0.632	2.91	2/7	0.286
	Orientation	17/26	0.654	15/26	0.577	2.54	5/15	0.333

Appendix A Revised 8/2/06

Mountain Empire Community College
Orientation SDV 100
Student Assistance Questionnaire

Name_____ Student ID_____

Plan/Program_____Adviser_____

I would like to have assistance or information for the following (check all that apply):

___ Deciding on my college plan/program

___ Improving my math skills

___ Improving my writing skills

___ Improving my study skills

___ Improving my time management skills

___ Using a computer

___ Learning disabilities

___ Physical disabilities

___ Financial aid for college

___ Transportation

___ Information on finding employment

___ Health issues

___ Personal Concerns

___ Veterans benefits for college

___ Assistance with distance education class

Others (please list)_____

Are you working (have a job) while attending college? ___yes ___no
If yes, how many hours on average are you working each week?
___1-5 hours ___6-10 hours ___11-20 hours ___21-39 hours ___40 hours or more
Is your job: ___college work study ___employment outside the college
Do you have dependents (children or other family members)? ___yes ___no