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NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT ORIENTATION: AN ASSESSMENT OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT ORIENTATION NEEDS

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NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT ORIENTATION: AN ASSESSMENT OF NON-
TRADITIONAL STUDENT ORIENTATION NEEDS

by

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A Doctoral Project Submitted to,
the College of Education and Human Sciences
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research project is to better understand the needs of non-traditional students and how to meet those needs through a specific college orientation program. Data results showed that non-traditional students at The University of Southern Mississippi felt they were not best served by their orientation experience. The researcher recommended, based on information provided by survey responses, that The Office of Orientation and Transition Programs implement an orientation session that was specifically for the non-traditional student population. By providing information on the university's speaking and writing center, health services, counseling services, and library resources, it could lead to positive student experiences, retention, and degree completion for the non-traditional student population.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DEDICATION

Thank you to my family for absolutely everything you have done; this would not have been possible without you. To my husband, Chad, for being a support system for our family as I have worked all day, taken classes at night, and spent many late nights working on schoolwork. I love you and appreciate you for helping me complete one of the biggest milestones in my life. To my children, Caleb and Ella Cate, who have endured their mom being so busy for the past several years, you are both so precious to me. To my parents, Reverend and Mrs. Dan and Diane Clark, who stepped up and filled in when Chad and I needed you.

Thank you to every single person who has encouraged me along this journey. This accomplishment is not just for me, it is my husband's, my children's, my parents, my family and friends, because if it were not for your love and support, I honestly do not think I would have made it till the end.

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Non-traditional students are becoming increasingly present on college campuses. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has data that indicates 38% of enrolled college students in 2007 were 25 years or older (NCES, 2009). NCES's projections of higher education enrollment from 2007-2018 suggest that the number of students over 25 will remain stable or increase during the current decade (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). To best serve these students, universities must focus on developing programs to guide these students in moving forward in their education so they can be successful in completing their degree (Pappas & Jerman, 2004).

There are many types of non-traditional students and while many have needs that are similar to most other students, there are different needs to be met per each distinct population. For instance, a single parent may need to schedule classes around their children's schedule, while another who works a full- time job needs classes that are offered at night or online (Markowitz, 2006). In an effort to assist non-traditional students with enrollment and their specific needs, having a specific orientation program for non-traditional students would be valuable. Fidler and Hunter (1989) argue that there is a positive relationship between first-year orientation programs and higher persistence toward degree completion, thus the need for specific orientation programming.

As an Assistant Director of Admissions at The University of Southern Mississippi (USM), I have input into orientation sessions and how they can be more beneficial for the students, and how sessions can be improved. Through my research of how non-traditional students can benefit from orientations geared specifically to their needs, I hope to use those strategies along with data from non-traditional students to make a solid recommendation for why we need to cater to this student population. Gathering data from non-traditional students who

currently attend the university on how they felt their orientation session prepared them for their

college experience, to interacting with students who are attending the orientation session prior to

being submerged in college studies, I plan to gather the data to substantiate my claim on why the

separate session is needed.

Background

The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) currently has a process where two

specific sections of orientation are conducted. One section is geared specifically to traditional

freshman students, which would be students who recently graduated from high school and have

not attended any other institution of higher learning. The other section is geared specifically

toward transfer students; students who have attended any institution of higher learning. In

speaking with Ms. Kayla Mitchell, Assistant Director of Orientation and Transition Programs,

USM has implemented specific guidelines for how the orientation sessions are conducted, and

details are explained below.

A freshman orientation experience is a two-day process. On the first day students check-

in with staff to receive their welcome folder, which contains their scholarship summary, financial

aid overview, degree program course list, and transfer credit summary of any credits earned

through dual-enrollment or test credits. They then attend a welcome event, go through concurrent

sessions based on topics including financial aid, scholarships, how to get involved, and more.

There are some social events for incoming freshmen students to meet one another, in hopes that

they make some friends to look forward to coming back in the fall. On the second day of the

session, all students learn about what to expect during the fall semester, as well go to their

academic advising session. During their academic advisement, they sit down with an advisor

from their program to plan the schedule for their first semester at Southern Miss.

A transfer orientation experience is a one-day process. Transfer students also receive a packet containing their scholarship summary, financial aid overview, degree program course list, and transfer credit summary of classes earned at prior institutions. Their program is condensed, as they have likely experienced a similar process at their previous institutions. First, the students attend a welcome session, which gives an overview for their day. Afterwards, they go through rotations of sessions – including their academic advisement. During their academic advisement, they sit down with an advisor from their program to plan the schedule for their first semester at Southern Miss.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines non-traditional students as meeting one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not hold a high school diploma. Though the orientation process is divided between freshman and transfer students, it is evident that the non-traditional student population is expected to fall into either category. In looking at the definition of a non-traditional student, it is apparent they do not fit the mold of being simply a freshman or transfer student.

The University of Southern Mississippi's Office of Orientation and Transition Programs survey students and their families at the end of the orientation experience; the data is entered into a spreadsheet and is examined at the end of the summer orientation season. The orientation staff then takes all information given, both negative and positive, and uses it to improve the next year's sessions. While they place significant importance on how the student viewed their experience, the surveys still cater to traditional freshman and transfer populations. In order to

address the needs of the non-traditional student population, an intentional study which looks at the students' orientation experience specifically involved needs to be conducted.

Statement of Problem

The problem addressed in this study is to evaluate the need for orientation sessions specifically for the non-traditional student population. The researcher of this study hopes the assessment of current non-traditional campus populations will expound on the data to reflect on the populations wants and needs for an effective orientation. The goal of this study is to identify the needs of non-traditional students and how they differ from those of a traditional student. The findings of the study will be used to make recommendations to The Office of Orientation and Transition Programs.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this action research project is to better understand the needs of non-traditional students and how to meet those needs through a specific college orientation program. At The University of Southern Mississippi (USM), non-traditional students attend orientation alongside traditional students. For non-traditional students, this approach is problematic given the different needs of each group.

The first step in this investigation is to identify and better understand the needs of non-traditional students at the university. Prior to beginning this investigation, a review of relevant literature on school orientation and non-traditional students will be conducted.

Definition of Terms

Non-traditional Student

A person who has delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not hold a high school diploma

School orientation

Process of making new students aware of a school's environment, rules, traditions, educational offerings, etc.

Research Questions

Question 1:

What are the specific needs of non-traditional students at USM?

Question 2:

Is USM orientation meeting the needs of non-traditional students?

Question 3:

What improvements can be made to meet the needs of non-traditional students?

Methodology and Research Process

The quantitative method will be used to conduct the research project. The first part of this research will examine the Office of Admissions work environment and through observation of how The University of Southern Mississippi conducts orientation sessions for freshman students determine if a separate session is needed for non-traditional students.

The second part of this research will include a series of surveys, which will gather students' demographic information as well as how they perceived their orientation experience. In working with our Institutional Research office on campus, I will gather data specific to my non-

traditional student perimeters, as defined above, to target currently enrolled students for the
second part of this research. Refer to appendix A for survey instrument.

Assumptions and Limitations

Having implemented a survey research design questioning students who are currently
enrolled at The University of Southern Mississippi, created a set of assumptions and limitations,
which the researcher must be aware. Assumptions that affected the study were:

1. Students may not be willing to participate in the survey.

2. The honesty of students' response.

Limitations that must be considered were:

1. The sample size of participants.

2. Timeframe in which student attended his or her orientation.

3. The length of the study.

CHAPTER II– LITERATURE REVIEW

A thorough search for literature pertaining to non-traditional students and their orientation experiences revealed a significant lack of information. This lack of literature lends to the imperative need for this research to be conducted, so the findings can lead to further study. Literature reviewed gives an overview of the value of orientation programming, who makes up the non-traditional student population, what their specific needs are, and suggestions on how specific orientations can meet those needs.

It is important to note that perhaps the actual content and design of the orientation has the most impact (Arnold, 2016). In other studies, participants indicated they had anxiety due to age gaps between themselves and others participating in orientation (Benavides & Keyes, 2016). With this being, said research has shown that students achieve success and have better learning outcomes when participating in orientation (Davis, 2018).

Non-traditional students can offer diversity within economic competitiveness. Sustaining the nation's prosperity in the 21st century will require us to make effective use of their talents and abilities (Worth & Stephens, 2011). Diversity enriches the educational experience (Bundy, 2004). One can learn from those whose experiences, beliefs, and perspectives are different from our own, and these lessons can be taught best in a richly diverse intellectual and social environment (Hawkins, 2000).

Universities are coming to recognize the great potential for increased revenue from enrolling non-traditional students (Hadfield, 2003). One potential resource for universities to gain monetary increase from adult students is based on state funding formulas (NCSL, 2014). The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs cited that in 2011, 555,329 veterans were receiving educational benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill; these numbers add up to be a significant

amount of tuition (Education & Training, n.d). With tuition increasing, non-traditional students can help bridge the gap of cost needed to fund the institution (Richardson & King, 2000).

Non-Traditional Student Population

When a person hears the term "non-traditional" student, often the student's age is considered in why they are being categorized in this population. It is important to note that a student can be classified as non-traditional due to many factors. The National Center for Education Statistics defines non-traditional students as meeting one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not hold a high school diploma.

There can be many reasons a person may delay their enrollment into postsecondary education. A gap year, which has been a popular European concept is making a significant influence on American students today. Students are choosing to take some time after high school and explore different subjects, which is mainly through finding employment or doing volunteer work. (Chen, 2017).

Students also delay enrollment by choosing to join a branch of the military. As a tool for recruitment, students who enlist have an opportunity to have their college tuition covered as well as earn a living stipend when they choose to serve in the military. While the military does offer opportunity to earn credits while serving and completing their military contract, service members often wait until they have fulfilled their enlistment before pursuing a college degree (Altman, 2018).

Encompassing the remaining sub-categories, including works full time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent;

does not hold a high school diploma, can work dependently, a person who works full time while attending school, or often has the responsibility of having to provide for their family. In the case of a person who does not hold a high school diploma, they possibly withdrew from high school because they became a single parent and could not devote time to their studies (Chen, 2017).

Non-traditional Student Needs

What research has shown thus far is that while the number of non-traditional students are increasing, universities are not adapting their programs of study to serve the adult student body (Hadfield, 2003). The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) found that many colleges and universities have struggled to adjust to the changing demographics on their campuses. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) noted that without good models, colleges and universities will continue to struggle as they serve the growing population of non-traditional students. If non-traditional students are to be successful, colleges must strive to remove the barriers these students face (Hardin, 2008).

Colleges and universities are seeing an increase in their adult student enrollment (Worth & Stephens, 2011). A concern is that although these colleges and universities are seizing the opportunity to increase their tuition dollars, many of these same institutions are being criticized for not providing adequate services to retain them (Bundy, 2004). If adult students are going to develop and prosper on university campuses, then special programs need to be readily available to support them. Adult students typically need assistance with adjustment and having an orientation created specifically for their student demographic is beneficial for them to feel comfortable in a university setting (Bundy, 2004).

Studies have shown that while adult learners are more focused on their coursework, they have difficulty adjusting and juggling their education alongside their life responsibilities

(Fairchild, 2003). Studies have indicated "[a]dult students are intimidated upon initial return to college" (Carlin, 2001 p. 10). This factor is found to be common in most adult students. They come, find themselves overwhelmed by a faster paced academic setting, and they often struggle to adjust to their surroundings. These students face institutional barriers that may impede their studies (Fairchild, 2003). They need help with adjusting themselves to a collegiate setting.

There is a lack of services being offered to the growing population of non-traditional students from public universities (Cross, 2000). A study performed by the American Council on Education shows that there are significant gaps in services being offered for non-traditional students from community colleges and public four-year institutions. Community colleges offer an average of 64%, while public universities offer an average of 45% of services geared specifically toward adult students. These students will not be successful in completing their degrees if universities do not begin to offer more services to help them succeed (Hennessy, 2013). Research has shown that institutions need to engross themselves in outreach activities that encourage participation. Universities should focus on developing programs to assist the student in moving forward in their education so they can be successful in completing their degree (Pappas & Jerman, 2004).

The research has proven that adult students are increasing enrollment on college campuses and though the Bureau of Labor Statistics is projecting the U.S. will have a full job recovery from the recession by 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.), this student population will still be working towards degree completion. If institutions of higher learning keep working towards meeting the needs of adult students, the students will be more inclined to stay enrolled and contribute to retention rates. This will not only lead to helping enrollment

numbers for schools but it will also contribute to making the communities these students live in thrive.

Non-Traditional Student Orientation Programming

As we have seen from the research above, non-traditional students have specific needs and having them met is crucial to their academic success. In looking at further research and literature provided on said research, it can be proven that non-traditional students benefit from having an orientation session geared specifically for them (Pappas & Jerman, 2004).

There are many aspects to consider when planning programs for non-traditional students. The preparation for the program requires research pertaining to which needs should be addressed in preparation for programming (Conover, 1991). The design of the orientation program needs to be conducive to your student population. What times are feasible for non-traditional students (Conover, 1991)? Determining what all offices need to be involved in the orientation and making sure they have representation at the program (Conover, 1991). Once the program has been implemented and the orientation season is complete, it is important to access and evaluate the success of the program (Conover, 1991). During a thorough program, evaluation will lead to success of future orientation sessions (Conover, 1991).

Many non-traditional students who fall into an older age category, may need to have their classes offered online to help facilitate their degree completion. This particular group would need to have an orientation that was offered via online resources (Jesnek, 2012). The needs of students and the digital components that are being offered to assist non-traditional students are crucial to online courses being successful (Jesnek, 2012).

One thing found that could be of help was to offer some technological help before the student started degree specific course. The idea of practical application strategies in the form of

pre-enrollment computer competency placement testing and the implementation of required, degree-credit introductory computer courses must be established as a national initiative in order to formalize the concerted effort needed to encourage the overall academic success of non-traditional students nationwide (Jesnek, 2012). It is imperative that adequate student services be made available to online students so they feel they are having their needs met (Kennedy, 1984).

The overall idea for orientations geared specifically toward non-traditional students is to help the student acclimate to their college environment. Institutions of higher learning must look at ways to assist students toward degree completion. It is important to keep a student motivated to persist toward degree completion. One of the ways is to make sure the student is involved in campus community, which could be addressed at orientation, making sure they know what all services are provided for their needs (Wyatt, 2011).

CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

This study employed a primarily quantitative method, with mainly questions posed using a Likert scale, but did include three open-ended questions to gather the participants' specific thoughts. Data collected during this study, was done so with the intention of contributing to the assessment of any needed changes on how current orientation sessions are conducted at The University of Southern Mississippi. The purpose of this study was to better understand the needs of non-traditional students and how those needs could be met through a specific college orientation program. The following sections examine the research questions, research design, instrumentation, timeline, participants, and data collection procedures and analysis.

Research Questions

The study consisted of a quantitative web-based survey designed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the specific needs of non-traditional students at USM?
2. Is USM orientation meeting the needs of non-traditional students?
3. What improvements can be made to meet their needs?

Research Design

This study used a quantitative method to collect data in response to research. The questions were primarily close-ended, but did consist of three open-ended questions to gain the participants specific notations of how to make the orientation more conducive to their needs. The survey, was administered online through Qualtrics® (See Appendix A), and designed to be sent via email. Qualtrics® is a webbased platform that allows users to create and disseminate surveys, record data, and conduct simple analysis in an online environment. The University of Southern Mississippi provides free access to this software for the campus community.

Instrument

The researcher formulated the questionnaire (Appendix A) in order to obtain

insight into the needs of non-traditional students attending orientation at The University of

Southern Mississippi. The questionnaire was an original one, with the first section comprised of

demographic information. The questions then transitioned to questions about the student's

satisfaction with their orientation; these questions were answered on a Likert scale. The final

section of the questionnaire was comprised of three open-ended questions and were intended to

gather data for the students specified suggestions.

Timeline

The survey instrument was developed during the summer of 2020. The questionnaire-

required involvement of human subjects, therefore the researcher was required to submit an

application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in June 2020 (See Appendix B). The

researcher received notice of final IRB approval on July 2, 2020. Upon IRB approval, the survey

was activated and sent via USM email on July 3, 2020. It was open for a total of nine weeks,

completing the data collection period on September 7, 2020.

Participants

The population sampled for this study included undergraduate students who were

currently or had previously enrolled at The University of Southern Mississippi. The specific

population of students consisted of undergraduates who had attended an orientation session on

the Hattiesburg Mississippi campus. Student participants were recruited through an

announcement sent out via the USM Mailout system (See Appendix C). The announcement

highlighted the importance of participation from the targeted population and included specific

information about the study including the purpose and goals of the study. The announcement

also included logistical information that every participant needed to know before participating

such as an estimation of how much time would be needed to complete the survey, dates for the

data collection period, IRB approval information, contact information for the researcher, and a

link to the online survey. Students gave consent by clicking on the electronic survey link

contained within the mailout announcement.

Data Collection Procedures

The data was collected through an anonymous online questionnaire accessed by current

or previous university students via Qualtrics®. To ensure the confidentiality of the respondents,

no personal data was collected. The collection of data lasted for an nine-week period. After data

was collected, the number of completed surveys and response counts were recorded.

Assumptions and Limitations

Having implemented a survey research design questioning students who are currently or were

previously enrolled at The University of Southern Mississippi, created a set of assumptions and

limitations, which the researcher must be aware. Assumptions that affected the study were:

1. Students may not be willing to participate in the survey.

2. The honesty of students' response.

Limitations that must be considered were:

1. The sample size of participants.

2. Timeframe in which student attended his or her orientation.

3. The length of the study.

4. Students were distracted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER IV – FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study was completed to assess the needs of non-traditional students attending orientation at The University of Southern Mississippi. In this chapter the researcher will present and discuss the research findings from the study which will be presented in the following sections. The first section is an overview of participant demographics while the second section looks at the overall satisfaction of how participants felt the orientation prepared them for university. The following demonstrates a summary of the data collected and how it addresses the three research questions that were used to drive this study. Lastly, the researcher discusses how the findings affect the campus community while also providing recommendations to orientation leadership in an effort to design an orientation experience that is better suited for non-traditional student populations.

Participant Demographics

All participants were either current or former undergraduate students at The University of Southern Mississippi. There was a total number of 110 participants who started the online survey and 109 completed the survey for a completion rate of 99.1%. Only surveys that were completed fully were included in the data analysis. The demographic questions included questions about gender, age, marital status, employment status, class load, and classification.

Gender.

The first demographic questions that was reviewed was gender. Of the 109 participants, 66 self-identified as female and 43 self-identified as male. Table 1 shows the percentage of participants by gender.

Table 1

Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	43	39.4	39.4	39.4
	Female	66	60.6	60.6	100.0
	Total	109	100.0	100.0	

Age.

The second demographic question explored the age of the participants. As shown in Table 2, 14.7% fall into the 24 and under category, 39.4% were 25 – 34, 28.4% were 35-44 and 17.4% were 45 and older. The two largest groups fell within the two middle categories.

Table 2

Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	24 and under	16	14.7	14.7	14.7
	25 - 34	43	39.4	39.4	54.1
	35 - 44	31	28.4	28.4	82.6
	45 and over	19	17.4	17.4	100.0
	Total	109	100.0	100.0	

Marital Status.

The third demographic question examined was the marital status breakdown of the participants as shown in Table 3. The largest percentage, 42.2% of the participants fell into the single category. The next largest group was the married with children at 35.8%. The remaining groups of participants were made up of, 11.9% married, 8.3% with single, and 1.8% preferred not to respond.

Table 3

Marital Status

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Single	46	42.2	42.2	42.2
	Single with children	9	8.3	8.3	50.5
	Married	13	11.9	11.9	62.4
	Married with children	39	35.8	35.8	98.2
	Prefer not to respond	2	1.8	1.8	100.0
	Total	109	100.0	100.0	

Employment Status.

Another demographic was that reviewed for the project was employment status. The researcher wanted to gather the data to see what percentage of the participants were employed. Out of the 109, 99 of the participants opted to report their employment status. As seen in Table 4, 73.6% of the participants were employed full-time, while 35.4% were employed part-time.

Table 4

Employment Status

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Full-time	64	58.7	64.6	64.6
	Part-time	35	32.1	35.4	100.0
	Total	99	90.8	100.0	
Missing	System	10	9.2		
Total		109	100.0		

Current Class Load.

Another demographic piece collected was the students class load. To get a better understanding of how the students moved through their coursework, it was important to capture if they attended class full-time or part-time. Out of the 109 participants, only three did not respond. Of the 106 that did report their class load, the majority at 73.6% worked full-time while 26.4% worked part-time. Table 5 depicts the figures below.

Table 5

Current Class Load

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Full-time	78	71.6	73.6	73.6
	Part-time	28	25.7	26.4	100.0
	Total	106	97.2	100.0	
Missing	System	3	2.8		
Total		109	100.0		

Mode of Instruction.

The final information collected from the participants regarding their demographic data was what mode of instruction they used for the college coursework. As shown in Figure 1, most of the participants used the online mode of instruction for their coursework. While 43.52% participated in online instruction, the second largest percentage, 38.89%, partook in the hybrid method. Less than one third of the participants, 17.59%, chose to take their classes in the traditional on campus mode.

Figure 1

Mode of Instruction
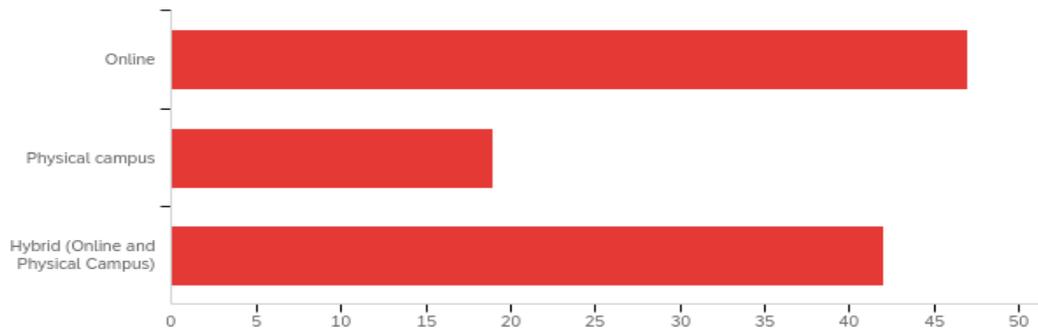
College Life and Orientation Satisfaction

To get an idea of the participants' reaction to their orientation experience and preparation for college life, the researcher asked a series of questions to gather insight. Each question posed requested the person to answer using a Likert scale that ranged from "Not at all" to "Well." The data for the following questions was broken down in crosstabulation tables to look at the categories of gender and age. The first question asked was to gauge the participants' adjustment to college life. Analyzing the data, Table 6 shows females felt they had a better grasp of adjusting than males. As shown, 71.8% out of the total 100% felt they were well to very well adjusted, while 69.7 of the total 100 % of males reflected, they were well adjusted. Table 7 shows that males between the ages of 24 and 44 were more adjusted than males 45 and over.

Table 6

How do you feel like you are adjusting to college life?

			How do you feel like you are adjusting to college life?					Total
			Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Well	Very Well	
Gender:	Male	Count	2	6	5	17	13	43
		% within Gender:	4.7%	14.0%	11.6%	39.5%	30.2%	100.0%
	Female	Count	1	11	6	23	23	64
		% within Gender:	1.6%	17.2%	9.4%	35.9%	35.9%	100.0%
Total		Count	3	17	11	40	36	107
		% within Gender:	2.8%	15.9%	10.3%	37.4%	33.6%	100.0%

Table 7

How do you feel like you are adjusting to college life?

Gender:				Not at all	Somewhat	Neutral	Well	Very Well	Total
				How do you feel like you are adjusting to college life?					
Male	Age:	24 and under	Count	1	1	1	4	3	10
			% within Age:	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%	40.0%	30.0%	100.0%
		25 - 34	Count	0	1	3	8	5	17
			% within Age:	0.0%	5.9%	17.6%	47.1%	29.4%	100.0%
		35 - 44	Count	1	2	0	4	2	9
			% within Age:	11.1%	22.2%	0.0%	44.4%	22.2%	100.0%
		45 and over	Count	0	2	1	1	3	7
			% within Age:	0.0%	28.6%	14.3%	14.3%	42.9%	100.0%
	Total		Count	2	6	5	17	13	43
			% within Age:	4.7%	14.0%	11.6%	39.5%	30.2%	100.0%
Female	Age:	24 and under	Count	1	0	1	2	2	6
			% within Age:	16.7%	0.0%	16.7%	33.3%	33.3%	100.0%
		25 - 34	Count	0	5	3	8	9	25
			% within Age:	0.0%	20.0%	12.0%	32.0%	36.0%	100.0%
		35 - 44	Count	0	4	2	7	8	21
			% within Age:	0.0%	19.0%	9.5%	33.3%	38.1%	100.0%
		45 and over	Count	0	2	0	6	4	12
			% within Age:	0.0%	16.7%	0.0%	50.0%	33.3%	100.0%
	Total		Count	1	11	6	23	23	64
			% within Age:	1.6%	17.2%	9.4%	35.9%	35.9%	100.0%

Next, participants were asked how satisfied they felt about their overall orientation experience. Table 8 shows that the overall consensus was that they were neither non-satisfied nor satisfied with it. A percentage of 37.4% depicted they felt neutral.

Table 8

How satisfied were you with your overall orientation experience?

Gender:				How satisfied were you with your overall orientation experience?					Total
				Not at all	Somewhat satisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	
Male	Age:	24 and under	Count	2	2	3	3	0	10
			% within Age:	20.0%	20.0%	30.0%	30.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		25 - 34	Count	0	0	7	6	3	16
			% within Age:	0.0%	0.0%	43.8%	37.5%	18.8%	100.0%
		35 - 44	Count	4	0	2	2	1	9
			% within Age:	44.4%	0.0%	22.2%	22.2%	11.1%	100.0%
		45 and over	Count	1	0	3	2	1	7
			% within Age:	14.3%	0.0%	42.9%	28.6%	14.3%	100.0%
	Total		Count	7	2	15	13	5	42
			% within Age:	16.7%	4.8%	35.7%	31.0%	11.9%	100.0%
Female	Age:	24 and under	Count	0	1	1	2	2	6
			% within Age:	0.0%	16.7%	16.7%	33.3%	33.3%	100.0%
		25 - 34	Count	3	2	7	8	6	26
			% within Age:	11.5%	7.7%	26.9%	30.8%	23.1%	100.0%
		35 - 44	Count	0	1	12	5	3	21
			% within Age:	0.0%	4.8%	57.1%	23.8%	14.3%	100.0%
		45 and over	Count	1	0	5	5	1	12
			% within Age:	8.3%	0.0%	41.7%	41.7%	8.3%	100.0%
	Total		Count	4	4	25	20	12	65
			% within Age:	6.2%	6.2%	38.5%	30.8%	18.5%	100.0%
Total	Age:	24 and under	Count	2	3	4	5	2	16
			% within Age:	12.5%	18.8%	25.0%	31.3%	12.5%	100.0%
		25 - 34	Count	3	2	14	14	9	42
			% within Age:	7.1%	4.8%	33.3%	33.3%	21.4%	100.0%
		35 - 44	Count	4	1	14	7	4	30
			% within Age:	13.3%	3.3%	46.7%	23.3%	13.3%	100.0%
		45 and over	Count	2	0	8	7	2	19
			% within Age:	10.5%	0.0%	42.1%	36.8%	10.5%	100.0%
	Total		Count	11	6	40	33	17	107
			% within Age:	10.3%	5.6%	37.4%	30.8%	15.9%	100.0%

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Figure 2 shows, the overall breakdown of how the participants felt about their satisfaction to college life and orientation. By asking questions pertaining to their experience during the orientation session, the length it lasted, and the information that was given, we can get a better understanding of the orientation sessions at The University of Southern Mississippi. It was a mixture of results but overall, it shows that there are areas that need improvement.

Figure 2

Overall Experience by gender and age
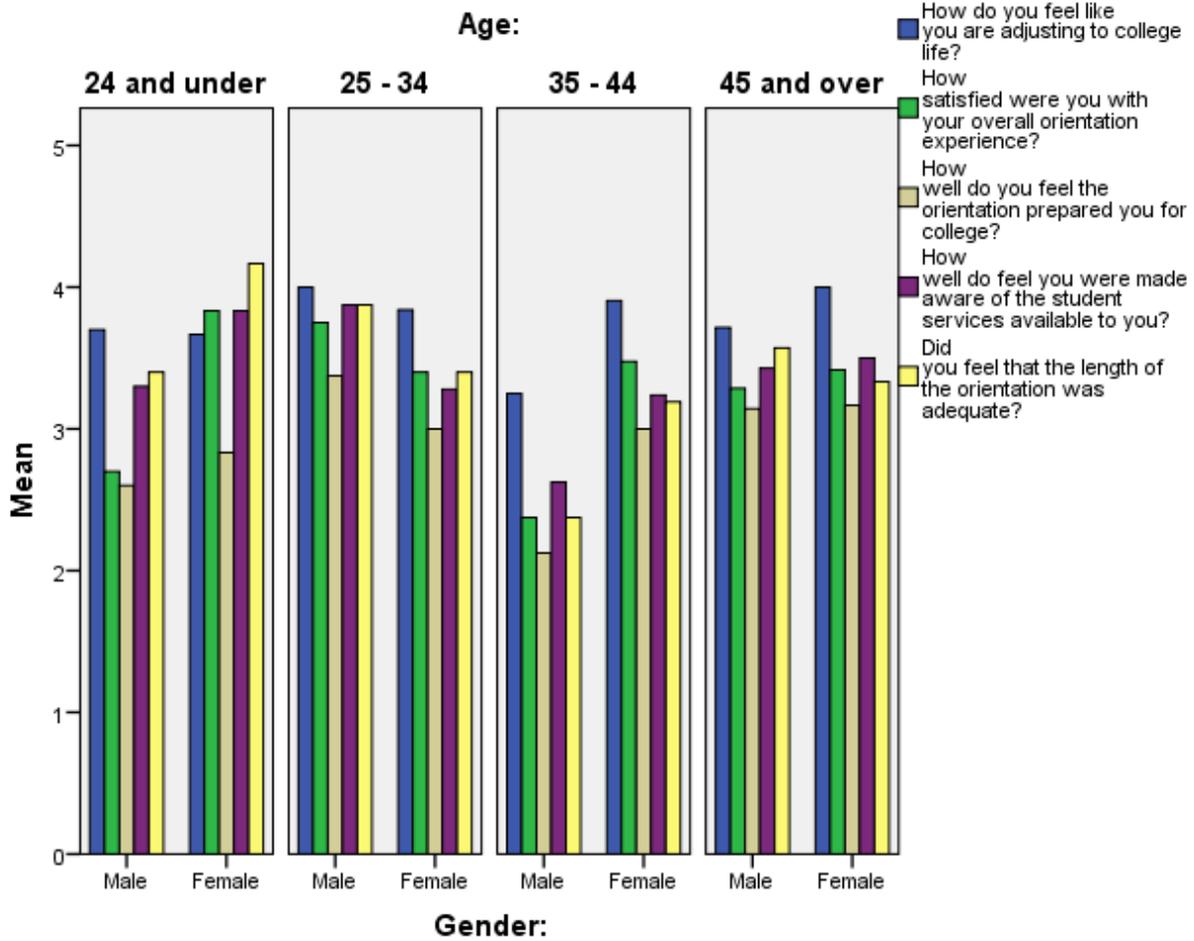
The research shows that while the orientation experience at USM is adequate for non-traditional students, there are areas that could be improved. There were many thoughtful answers given in the open-ended questions. When the participants were asked about what they found helpful, they gave the following examples:

"Advice to purchase school planner (which has important, relevant event dates already noted within) and use it to write in assignments, test dates, etc."

"The orientation instructor was very friendly, knowledgeable and approachable. A great point-of-contact is pivotal for orientations, so that people feel that have someone who will help them navigate through the system until they are comfortable."

"The thing that I found most helpful about orientation was how my advisor found which classes transferred and my options for those that did not transfer."

The researcher also wanted to gather information for the participants on what they specifically felt was the least helpful during the orientation experience. The following data was gathered:

"The tour focused mostly on class buildings. Building for dorm life needs, finance help, psych help were not covered."

"As a non traditional student, I didn't need orientation at all."

"Honestly, the whole presentation part could have been condensed into an online format without having to attend for several hours. Overall it was not very helpful."

"How difficult it was to find someone that could give me information."

"The people making my scheduale at orientation did not have a clue about what classes I needed to be in for my program to keep me on track. So I ended up missing out on good classes and being rushed to graduate with a feeling of being unprepared for jobs."

"The mandatory online orientation contained a lot of content that was not applicable to older and/or transfer students. I was frustrated that I had to go through a whole module about dorm life when I would never use it. It also took a lot of time away from my busy schedule. As far as the mandatory online orientation, I think the transfer students would be better served with an abridged version that covers only services available on campus (like ODA, writing center)--more like the graduate student's online orientation. However, I found the entirety of the in-person orientation helpful."

"Orientation focused on the traditional student. As a non-traditional student, I felt like a tag along. Also, people thought I was the parent and not the student."

The final open-ended question was used to gain some insight on what the participants wished they had experienced during their orientation session. Examples of data collected were: *"How financial aid works and what to do/ where to go when I have a mental breakdown from the stress of school. Also what options do we have for appeal if we feel we've been treated unfairly? Perhaps if I knew how to better utilize the resources available to me I wouldn't feel like this experience is such a waste of money."*

"More of the basic needs building covered: admissions, financial aid, dorm needs, meal plans, ect. I spent a lot of time looking for buildings with certain offices in them and didnt know the names of the buildings or where on campus to find them."

"More information about advisors and what to do when they are inept."

"There should be more information on how to connect with campus resources. Also, the USM web site is challenging to navigate when trying to find anything. It would be helpful to have a pamphlet that contains all the contact information for the resources available on campus for quick and easy access."

"Why non-traditional students are marginalized."

"How to time manage with a full-time job, husband, kids, house, and full-time college."

"Counseling services, the ombudsman office, the parking lot breakdown and understanding parking,"

"Different textbook resources. I had no idea that rentals were an option, so I spent so much money on new textbooks in my first semester"

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

The research shows non-traditional students do have needs specific to their student population. One of the participants noted the following:

"Some of the dialogue and material was geared toward probably the majority of students, aged 18-24, who still fit within the range of traditional student life, expectations, and opportunities. As a non-traditional student, I felt many of the events, offerings, and opportunities were automatically out of reach for me, or could not be considered due to the additional life factors, obligations, and time restrictions I have. It can feel alienating, isolating, or unfair. To be fair, the focus on expectations of majority of traditional students is appropriate, but maybe an different section focusing on non-traditional students unique challenges, experiences, and opportunities would have been more inclusive and helped the sense of "belonging" and support."

Another participant had similar views of their orientation experience at USM. As indicated below in their response, they would have liked to be in a group of their peers.

"I did not find GEWW very helpful or relevant to Non-traditional students. I also think it would have been more helpful to connect with others that were non-traditional students, rather than many students that were freshman."

There were many with the same view, the programming did not take into consideration how non-traditional students would feel as they were grouped with traditional students.

Other researchers have studied and surveyed the non-traditional student and assessed their needs, but for the sake of this study the researcher wanted to know the needs of students who attended USM. To be an inclusive environment for all students on the university campus, the needs of all need to be taken into consideration. An idea of needs identified in the study found: *"Topics that address challenges, resources, and expectations non-traditional students face, could expect, and ways to address them so that they can be as prepared as traditional students, feel more confident that they can balance the different obligations in addition to school, and encouragment that declares they can be just as successful as the traditional students who come with the openness and lack of restrictions that the orientation is designed toward. Specifically, balancing work, childcare, study and life skills that promote life balance, pacing of life with school expectations, and realistic perspectives on how to balance their limitations, expectations, and obligations so that they have a vision of the path they can take, as well as examples of students who are like them who have found ways to do just that."*

There should be an expectation that non-traditional students need support for a positive collegiate outcome. The vast maturity of most non-traditional students, and the intricacy of their day to day lives, requires they have distinct beliefs for their educational experiences and require different needs for services responsive to their circumstances (Maehl, 2020). In an effort to assist The University of Southern Mississippi with meeting the expectations of this student population, the researcher has provided some recommendations for an improvement in the orientation experience.

Recommendations for The Office of Orientation and Transition Programs.

After analyzing the data collected, the research recommends that The Office of Orientation and Transition Programs creates and implements an orientation session that is specifically for non-traditional student populations. To structure the session to serve as the upmost benefit to the student, the researcher can draw what was thought to be positive aspects as well as what the student wished they had covered during their orientation.

There were mixed responses on how the student felt their advisement appointment went during the orientation session. Some participants felt their advisor was well versed in the program requirements, while others felt their advisor did not have a strong grasp on what was required. The researcher recommends that advisors are taken through a thorough training of what the degree requires. This will increase the student's perception of how knowledgeable their advisor is, plus utilize the time in a greater manner.

The consensus of non-traditional students being included with traditional students was not a positive experience. The icebreakers that were fun and interactive for the traditional student, the non-traditional student felt they were wasteful of their time. They also indicated they would appreciate from being with their peers, having someone who could relate to their situation would be helpful going through the process.

The recommendation would also be that orientation programming be more intentional to meeting the noted needs stated in the data collected. The length of the session would need to be considered, as the research indicated most non-traditional students are working full-time so taking multiple days off to go through orientation is not an option for most. The researcher also recommends a short general assembly prior to their advisement session that covers services

offered for student success. For example, providing information on the university's speaking and writing center, health services, counseling services, and library resources.

Conclusion

In the current climate, given that non-traditional student populations are continuing to grow across college campuses, there is a responsibility to ensure the student is equipped with the tools needed for collegiate success. Orientation programming specific to non-traditional needs is a wonderful place to start. The University of Southern Mississippi is one of the top three state funded universities in Mississippi and would be on the forefront of providing services exclusively for non-traditional students. This could lead to not only positive student experiences, retention, and degree completion for the non-traditional student population, but also for greater enrollment at the university.

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APPEDNIX A – NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT ORIENTATION SURVEY

<u>Demographics</u>

1. Gender:
   a. Male
   b. Female

2. Age:
   a. 24 and under
   b. 25 – 34
   c. 35 – 44
   d. 45 and over

3. Marital Status:
   a. Single
   b. Single with children
   c. Married
   d. Married with children
   e. Prefer not to respond

4. Employment Status:
   a. Full-time
   b. Part-time

5. Current Class Load:
   a. Full-time
   b. Part-time

6. Current Classification:
   a. Freshman
   b. Sophomore
   c. Junior
   d. Senior

7. Mode of instruction:
    a. Online
    b. Physical campus

College Life and Orientation Satisfaction

8. How do you feel like you are adjusting to college life?
    a. Not at all
    b. Somewhat
    c. Neutral
    d. Well
    e. Very well

9. How satisfied were you with your overall orientation experience?
    a. Not at all
    b. Somewhat satisfied
    c. Neutral
    d. Satisfied
    e. Very satisfied

10. How well do you feel the orientation prepared you for college?
    a. Not at all
    b. Somewhat
    c. Neutral
    d. Well
    e. Very well

11. How well do feel you were made aware of the student services available to you?
    a. Not at all
    b. Somewhat
    c. Neutral
    d. Well
    e. Very well

12. Did you feel that the length of the orientation was adequate?

    a. Not at all

    b. Somewhat

    c. Neutral

    d. Well

    e. Very well

13. What did you find most helpful during orientation?

    a. _____

14. What did you find was the least helpful?

    a. _____

15. What do you wish your orientation had covered?

    a. _____

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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.
- FACE-TO-FACE DATA COLLECTION WILL NOT COMMENCE UNTIL USM'S IRB MODIFIES THE DIRECTIVE TO HALT NON-ESSENTIAL (NO DIRECT BENEFIT TO PARTICIPANTS) RESEARCH.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-20-304
PROJECT TITLE: Non-traditional Student Orientation: An Assessment of Non-traditional Orientation Needs
SCHOOL/PROGRAM: School of Education, Educational Research and Admin
RESEARCHER(S): Naomi Clement, Holly Foster
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved
CATEGORY: Expedited
5. Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for nonresearch purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis).
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: July 2, 2020

Donald Sacco Jr.

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

APPENDIX C - ONLINE

Dear Potential Participant,

We would like to ask you to consider participating in a study because you are a student attending The University of Southern Mississippi. The purpose of this action research project is to better understand the needs of non-traditional students and how to meet those needs through a specific college orientation program.

If you choose to participate in this study, and are at least 18 years of age, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire with 15 questions that will include basic demographic questions, adjustment to college life questions, and overall orientation experience questions. The questionnaire will take no more than 30 minutes to complete.

There are minimal risks involved in this study. All collected data will remain completely anonymous, and all information obtained will remain completely confidential. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to decline participation or to discontinue participation at any point without concern of penalty, prejudice, or any other negative consequence. Upon completion of data compilation, all questionnaire data will be destroyed. Results from this research may be used to benefit the profession student affairs and the necessity of non-traditional student orientation. The data from all participants will be analyzed and findings compiled into a research report which will be submitted as an assignment for a graduate research methods course at the University of Southern Mississippi. Additionally, the findings from this study may be shared with training and practicing higher education professionals, and used in regional conferences and presentations. If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact Naomi Clement at Naomi.Clement@usm.edu. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Holly Foster, Ph.D.

This project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820.

By clicking 'next' you are giving permission for the information collected in this survey questionnaire to be obtained and used for the purposes stated in the consent letter above.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Naomi Clement