Assessing the Usefulness of a New Students' Orientation Program at the University of Guyana

by

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify baseline data on University of Guyana students' demographics, success indicators, and the usefulness of the existing orientation program from students' perspectives. This action research study employed multiple data collection methods, including an online questionnaire with six sections totaling 23 questions, distributed to all Turkeyen campus students (N=9342) at the end of the first semester of the academic year 2022/2023, and statistical student records from the institution's database.

Qualitative data was gathered through follow-up online semi-structured interviews to delve deeper into students' perceptions of program utility. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, mode) and inferential tests (*t*-tests), while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis via an inductive approach. Data from 409 questionnaires revealed that students generally perceived the orientation program as a helpful resource for their transition to the university. In-depth insights into students' assessments of the program's usefulness were gained through follow-up interviews with a sample of 10 questionnaire respondents. Creating college-going knowledge, management of expectations, and convenience were key themes developed which captured interviewees assessments of the orientation program. This study also found statistically significant differences in means between orientation attendees and non-attendees self-reported first year academic performance and the number of extra-curricular clubs/associations joined. These findings align partially with the Schlossberg

Theory of transition. The study's key findings revealed a majority of first-generation university students among respondents. This proactive intervention provides insights for continuous improvement and targeted transition programming, aligning with the institution's goals for student success.

Keywords: Students success, Schlossberg Transition Theory, New Students' Orientation, Targeted Transition Programming, Multiple Methods Action Research.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Albertha King, whose determination and gentle touch laid the foundation for a future illuminated by education. To my daughter, Maya Gabriella King, thank you for your joyful spirit, patience, kindness, and wisdom which surpassed my comprehension during this journey. Finally, I also share this work with my family and the love of my life, for their encouragement and understanding every step of the way.

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CHAPTER 1

REFLECTIONS, FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND COMING FULL CIRCLE

Twenty-two years ago, at the age of 16, I applied and was admitted to the University of Guyana (UG) to read for a two-year diploma program. I completed that program and immediately thereafter pursued a further two years of undergraduate studies to earn a degree. I recall that I did not attend orientation in any of those four years of my studies, although I was aware of the existence of such a program from around my second or third year onwards. Understanding my ignorance about and non-participation in the university's orientation program(s) is linked to the situation of my personal experience transitioning to tertiary education. A synopsis of that experience is described below.

Attending university was an expected and accepted step in my education journey because of a family commitment to continue with tertiary education following the first-generation achievement of my parents. Whilst I did not question this predetermined path before me, I had no control over the timing. I lobbied, unsuccessfully, for a gap year between secondary school and the start of tertiary level studies. My plan was to enter the world of work, consequently, I did not invest any time researching or preparing for university. Additionally, I did not apply to enroll in the University of Guyana in the early/normal application period. My mother refused my request for a gap year and presented me with two options: either re-enroll in secondary school to prepare for and write advanced-level exams or try to be admitted to the UG as a late applicant. I reluctantly chose the latter.

In retrospect, my experiences of university were shaped by these initial circumstances whereby the timing was not what I wanted, and I most certainly was not ready for the experience. I struggled with self-regulation for study and time management. I did not know what was expected in my academic work and was too timid to ask for help. I felt out of step with peers (some my age, most of them older) around me who were comfortable engaging with lecturers. I spent my first semester trying to catch up, conceal and overcome the handicap of my late enrollment and other key situational aspects of my entry to university. UG was vast in comparison to the secondary-school environment, impersonal and intimidating.

As a commuter student I attended classes but did not linger on campus afterward, preferring instead to rush home to the familiarity of that environment. I did not know what help I needed, much less how to seek that aid. On conclusion of the first year, I attained a C-grade average overall but had two failed courses (one in each semester). I was allowed to progress to the second year albeit with a heavier course load in each semester. In retrospect, I was not ready for my transition to university. Nevertheless, by the end of the second year, through new friendships the experience of university improved. However, I did graduate without seeking any formal orientation or utilizing other support services available.

Although graduation itself is an accomplishment, in hindsight if I understood and was prepared for the university experience, by attending orientation and other activities I

may have been more intentional in aspects such as choosing a major, getting involved in student life, navigating/utilizing student services and/or integrating academically.

Quite ironically, four years post-graduation, I was not only working at the university but also responsible for planning the annual orientation program. As a member of staff, I gained insight into the programmatic and financial limitations which impact the delivery of the orientation program. Therefore, over the years, I have also advocated for changes for example, orientation week now appears in the formal Academic calendar where it was overlooked previously. This underscored the program's importance across the campus and shifted the perception that planning a formal program was optional. Furthermore, securing a dedicated budget line for the program within the Registry eliminated the need for virement requests, which suggested previously (perhaps inadvertently) that the orientation program was a peripheral endeavor. Whilst there remains room for improvement, those developments represented considerable progress.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the integration of a week-long orientation program into the annual academic calendar, student participation rates consistently fall below 50% of the annual student enrollment. For example, the average percentage of student turn-out to the campus-wide level of new students' orientation over the period 2016/2017 through 2019/2020 was 3.1% where the average annual enrollment was 3066 students. Further, over the period 2020/2021 through 2021/2022, the average percentage participation rate was 36.15% where the average annual enrollment was 3100 students. This raises a

critical question for me as a student affairs practitioner and orientation director: Do students perceive the UG new students' orientation program as being useful? Addressing this question comprehensively could potentially provide insights into the low participation rates and inform strategies for program improvement.

Moreover, in the past, there has not been any clear institutional alignment between the practice of hosting new students' orientation and the university's strategic goals. In fact, my work has been guided by informal practitioner knowledge, inherited previous practices and trial/error approaches to event programming rather than academic research knowledge, and/or theory which drive desired outcomes for orientation-type programs in many other international higher education contexts. Jacobs (2010) advised that orientation programs form a key part of institutional strategies for impacting and/or improving student retention, persistence, academic achievement, engagement and institutional fit. However, at UG in addition to the absence of a clear nexus between the institution's strategic plan and the purpose of the annual orientation program, there is also a dearth of available analytic information about our students and performance indicators such as student retention, which in turn, could be used to improve the focus of the orientation program.

Significance of this Monograph

Based on the forgoing, where do I start in assessing the UG context? Are there socioeconomic and/or other demographic contextual considerations that can be used to refine our orientation planning? Beyond answering the main question of utility, the

findings and focus of this study is to use relevant data and theory to interrogate my role as a students' affairs practitioner. I believe, such an outlook is foundational for strategic planning for UG's orientation program, instead of working intuitively and/or merely replicating the approach to the program as it was done historically. Finally, Wolcott et al., (2020) contend that "Orientation can help the university meet its goal around recruitment and retention, but also establish a baseline to address emerging economic and academic trends in higher education" (pp. 34-35). A comprehensive understanding of students' backgrounds and transition experiences is essential for institutions to provide targeted transition programming that supports students' integration into all aspects of campus life. This can increase the likelihood of retaining the annual average cohort of over 3,000 students, which would be financially advantageous to the sustainability of the institution.

Organization of Dissertation

In the foregoing paragraphs, I have detailed my individual experiences related to this research study. My exploration of the utility of orientation in my institutional context will be presented in a non-traditional thesis format, such that each chapter is whole and near ready for publication. Chapter 2 has been written as a monograph series contribution intended for publication. The target audience are fellow administrative practitioners and other academic peers of the university. In that chapter, complete study findings are reported. Chapter 3 has also been prepared for publication as a feature article in the *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention*, a journal dedicated to research and theory on related matters. Key findings are extrapolated in that chapter and practical

implications for improving the delivery of our annual orientation program are discussed. Finally, in Chapter 4, I reflect on the significance of the study, the doctoral program, and my personal development.

CHAPTER 2

THE MONOGRAPH STORY

Larger Context: Students' Transitions to Higher Education

The first year of university or college is critical for students' successful transitions (Tinto, 1993, 2012). Consequently, there has been scholarly interest and considerable research for several decades about students' transitions and first-year experiences which foster or hinder academic and social adjustment (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). The study of students' transitions in the north American context has focused on mitigating student retention given that this was and remains problematic for many institutions. Faced with the challenge of retaining students, many such institutions re-positioned their orientation program as an important up-front investment and intervention to stem attrition and the costs associated with replacing students (Mack, 2010).

New Students' Orientation

New students' orientation programs in colleges and universities serve a primary role of helping students transition into the new environment of higher education institutions by providing information and initial support needed (Chan, 2019; Mayhew, et al., 2010; Wolcott et al., 2020).

Orientation programs in higher education institutions today encapsulate a purpose of assisting students' adjustment to academic and social life of a college or university which may be multi-faceted as to extend to parental engagement, safety, crisis management and/or values related diversity and inclusivity. This represents a paradigm

shift from the historical conceptualization of orientation from the time of its emergence. Mack (2010) traces the first orientation-type program to Boston University in the early twentieth century. By early 1920s the first week of orientation was hosted by Maine University and the main objective of these programs as they grew in popular practice was to "indoctrinate students into the college and to conduct the basic transactions that needed to occur before the start of classes" (p. 3). The purpose and goal of these types of programs were clearly institutional driven, requiring from students 'fit' with the institution largely based on their norms, values, and practices. Due to the absence of formal students affairs practice and professionals in higher education up until the 1920s, the responsibility for orienting new students was accepted by faculty with some assistance from upper-class students (Mack, 2010). This responsibility shifted from faculty over time (circa 1950s) to be planned and executed by students' affairs personnel under the office of the dean of men, which would be today's equivalent of the university Registrar (Mack, 2010). As orientation programs became more mainstream and linked to students' retention, institutions sought to design orientation programs driven by student-identified needs, or at best to strike a balance which met the needs of students and the goals of the institutions. University orientation programs are today normative in higher educational institutions, since its first appearance in the late nineteenth century (Ward-Roof & Guthrie, 2010). Various permutations of these programs are utilized by universities today ranging from traditional on campus type programs to online, hybrid conducted over an average period of 3 to 7 days.

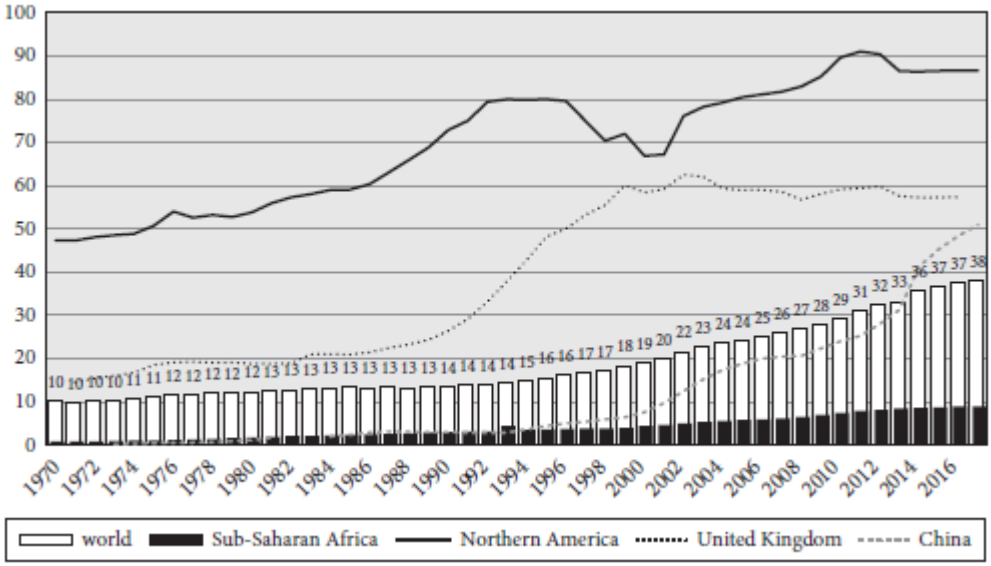
The Higher Education Landscape

There has been a slow yet steady growth – from 14 to 38 percent – in tertiary education enrollment, across every region of the world, since 1990 (UNESCO, 2019). Based on this data, Marginson et al. (2020) project that by 2030 half of all young people globally will enter tertiary education and pursue a first degree. A notable exception to these global trends has been in the United States (US) higher education market—the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) reported that between 2009 and 2020, there was a decrease in total college enrollments for degree seeking students by 9 percent. However, globally it is projected that participation rates in higher education for individual countries will continue expand until they reach near universal education levels (Cantwell et al., 2018).

The higher education landscape within which Guyana exists straddles the geographic, economic, political, and socio-cultural spaces of the Caribbean and Latin America. Consequently, in matters of population development, which includes education, indicators of progress are grouped and reported regionally. In that context, recent reports revealed that in just under two decades, gross enrollment rates in tertiary education in the Caribbean and Latin American region grew, from 21 percent to 52 percent (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019). This expansion in enrollment rates aligns with general growth in tertiary education enrollment worldwide given UNESCO's recent report that apart from a few low-income countries, globally, the gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education was also growing rapidly in every region as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education globally 1970 - 2017



Note. By Marginson, S., Callender, C., & Locke, W. (2020). Higher education in fast moving times: Larger, steeper, more global, and more contested. In C. Callender, W. Locke, & S. Marginson (Eds.), *Changing higher education for a changing world* (pp. 3-17). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Source: UNESCO 2019.

Tertiary education provides benefits that are economic and psychosocial for individuals and the collective society. This is evident in lasting outcomes ranging from increased civic engagement and philanthropy, better health, lower poverty, better lifetime earnings, better moral development of citizens, to lower rates of incarceration, and higher rates of volunteerism (Cox et al., 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 2012). Consequently, it may be argued that apart from remaining competitive in a global marketplace for graduates, there is a societal cost of not accessing tertiary education

given that “a college-educated workforce is critical” to national competitiveness (Tinto, 2012, p.2).

Contemporary Issues in the Higher Education Landscape

In today’s global higher education landscape, universities are confronted with several challenges which inform their strategic priorities. These include globalization in tertiary education whereby students, universities and researchers are crossing national borders, literally and figuratively aided by technology, for study, program delivery partnerships and/or to advance research. There are emergent threats as well which accompany globalization of tertiary education provision such as xenophobia and nationalistic agendas. Other issues include equitable access, shepherding an increasingly diverse demographic student population to persist and succeed in college to degree completion, social justice, technological development fueling in part the decline of brick-and-mortar institutions, increasing costs, decreasing revenue due to conditional funding, and operating within fragile economic systems, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19 (Wolcott et al., 2020).

These challenges can converge to impact the sustainability of universities given that there is often a corresponding relationship to revenue generation. Additionally, policy changes for public funding of colleges and universities, such as capping the cost of tuition loans and/or tethering funding to performance indicators such as persistence/retention and graduation rates rather than mere enrollment rates, are affecting funding and operations (Campbell & Nutt, 2014; Hillman, 2021).

Orientation of New Students in the Context of the current Higher Education Landscape

Cuseo (2007) defined students' success as "…a holistic phenomenon that embraces the multiple dimensions of personal development and the multiple goals of higher education" (p. 5). Other definitions of students' success all address an intersection between the outcomes desired by the institution (e.g., retention, persistence, academic achievement) and those desired by students, such as the achievement of post-graduation careers or study endeavors (Kuh et al., 2006; NCES, 2016; York et al., 2013). Moreover, Cuseo's definition embodies student success as extending beyond throughput and the cognitive nature of academe to the development of emotional, social, ethical, physical, and critical thinking as skills which contribute to lifelong learning in students (Cuseo, 1997, 2007).

Achieving student success, particularly aspects associated with institutional rates of student retention, persistence, and academic performance, may serve to influence public perception of institutional quality, in turn affecting prospects for external funding. Moreover, these kinds of data are increasingly sought after in accreditation or reaccreditation review processes as key institutional performance indicators (Campbell & Nutt, 2014). This study centers on first-year students' orientation as a transitional program intervention that may directly or indirectly impact students' success in the first year and their overall success as defined by retention and academic performance.

Local Context

Located on the northeastern shoulder of the South American continent lies the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, formerly British Guiana. Boasting 83,000 sq. miles Guyana is home to population just under 800,000 persons who reside on the Coastland or in the Hinterland, (the two main geographic regions) areas of the country (Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The racial/ethnic composition of the population includes six distinct groups (Amerindian/Indigenous, Afro-Guyanese, Indo-Guyanese, Chinese, Portuguese, and European) and an unofficial seventh "Mixed" heritage group (a combination of any of the six groups). Often referred to as a melting pot of cultures, the racial/ethnic composition of Guyana can be traced to its colonial past, except for the Amerindians who were the first peoples and settlers. Today, 57 years post-independence from the British empire, Guyana is the fastest growing economy in the region following the addition of oil in 2019/2020 to its main revenue generating sectors of agriculture and mining ("Economy of Guyana," 2023). According to UNESCO (2012) 12% of the population is tertiary educated. Moreover, it was reported in the Guyana labor force survey that amongst the working-age population (approximately 580,000 persons aged 15 and older), less than ten percent (5.8%) were tertiary educated persons (Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

The University of Guyana (UG) is the sole national public university offering four-year degrees and 2-year, 3-year, or 1-year associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Degree programs are offered in two separate time configurations, either as a 'two plus two' program or as 'straight four-year'

program. In the former, a student completes two years in an associate degree or diploma program, graduates and re-enrolls for a further two years in the to obtain a baccalaureate level degree. In the latter configuration, the student must successfully complete four years of study to earn the terminal baccalaureate degree.

With two main campuses at Turkeyen and Berbice, UG has remained the largest tertiary education provider since its inception in 1963. Students primarily commute to campus. Low-cost housing is provided for approximately 1% of the student population whose home regions are rural hinterlands. The institution has an annual average registration of 10,000 students. Finally, the UG is both a teaching and research institution that has a mission to be focused foremost on national development (University of Guyana Act, 1963).

University of Guyana, Turkeyen Campus receives the majority of government's budget subvention for tertiary institutions, an average of 69.25% up to 2019 (Ministry of Finance, n.d.). However, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 global pandemic and the Government of Guyana's own roll-out of an aggressive initiative to provide Guyanese with 20,000 scholarships for online studies at colleges and universities, initially external to the local tertiary landscape, this means that UG is in competition for a larger portion of the government's annual subvention for tertiary education, and there.is also growing competition from small private, offshore affiliated, universities (National Accreditation Council, n.d.).

The challenge for the future appears to be retaining and growing market share as a degree granting tertiary provider. This is a goal actively pursued by the administrators of the institution itself as outlined in its strategic plan, specifically to increase from the current registration average of 10,000 to 30,000 by the year 2040, (University of Guyana Blueprint 2040, 2019).

This project starts from the assumption that a pre-requisite to the achievement of the UG' strategic goal and the attendant characteristics of student success as defined in the previous section, is a comprehensive baseline data on key indicators of student success. As a Senior Assistant Registrar. I led a small staff of specialists to serve the non-academic needs of the Turkeyen campus student population. Those non-academic needs are welfare services related to housing, health (mental and physical), student safety, extra-curriculars and facilitating seamless transitioning of students both into and out of the institution.

UG's current Student Services & New Students' Orientation Program

Students' services at the Turkeyen campus are aimed at ensuring holistic students' success when complemented with the academic and other administrative aspects of studentship. Our program to transition students into the university is an annual cycle of orientation events. General orientation programming occurs over a five-day period, and it is hosted in the week preceding the commencement of classroom teaching. The format is a lecture-styled delivery of presentations followed by questions and answers with new students. These events are usually hosted in the largest lecture theatres on the campus

from 09:00 to 15:00h during orientation week. Adapting to the limitations of in-person engagement because of the pandemic, we shifted to online Zoom webinars as our mode of delivery.

Topics for each of the first four days are grouped in segments related to navigating bureaucratic i.e., communicating academic expectations and introducing student life enrichment communities. The UG approach to new students' orientation fits induction type activities, meaning first contact with students during week one of the semester in a series of short, focused events (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). It has not been driven by the contemporary vulnerabilities identified in the previous section, as facing global universities. However, the general orientation program, with a very modest budgetary allocation, is timed for delivery *prior* to the commencement of classes. Students' attendance is not mandatory. The essential topical elements of the program are crafted to introduce students to:

- Support services.
- Regulations and policies governing studentship.
- Extra-curricular activity options.
- Facilitate their engagement with the library to develop usage skills.
- The learning/learning platforms, and the student data portal/ student information system.

Research Questions

This study has been designed to examine available student data from UG, Turkeyen campus for information on the demographic and other performance trends to establish UG's baseline. Further, through this research I have solicited feedback from students to determine their assessment of the usefulness of the orientation program. Consequently, this study intends to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 What can I learn about the demographic composition and academic progress of the students, admitted between 2017-2021 to the Turkeyen campus, University of Guyana, to improve delivery and effective impact of the new students' orientation program?

RQ2 How can I use student feedback about the usefulness of the UG NSO to improve the program at the Turkeyen campus, University of Guyana?

RQ3 How can I use current students' feedback about their academic performance and social integration to develop targeted ways to increase orientation participation at the University of Guyana, Turkeyen campus?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Schlossberg Theory of Transition and 4 'S' Coping Factors

Nancy Schlossberg (1981, 1984) posited the Theory of transition to explain that the interaction of three sets of variables, which is pre and post transition environment factors, the type of transition and the personal characteristics of individuals experiencing a change, is what influences their abilities to adapt to transitional life events and non-events. This theorist's use of the term *non-events* describes the "non-occurrence of anticipated events" in the lives of individuals (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Transitions are described as a process with three distinct phases "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out" (Evans et al., 2010). Schlossberg (1984) presented the theory as a response to various transitions that adults are likely to experience with emphasis on the idea that adjustment is a process and the achievement of same in each situation depends on coping skills and factors intrinsic to the individual experiencing a transitional life event such as beginning college. Those four factors are articulated in a model called the 4 'S' Model for coping with transitions.

In this model these factors are the transition **Situation**, the psychological and demographic characteristics of the individual or variables within the Self, available Support resources to the individual experiencing the transition and knowledge and application of coping Strategies. Situational variables, such as the timing of the transition, trigger of the change, pre-existing stressors, perception of control over the transition, role

changes (whether positive or negative), and experience with transitions are all variables that may inform preferred or effective coping methods (Schlossberg, 1981, 1995).

Schlossberg (2011) advises that coping factors identified within the 'Self' refers to a mix of psychological, and sociodemographic variables which may help or hinder an individual navigating a transition. Similarly, 'Support' available to an individual dealing with a transition event in their life may function to provide encouragement, feedback, assistance, information, and affection to help with the process (Evans et al., 2010). Support may emanate from intimate relationships, friendships, family, and communities and institutions with whom the student or individual interacts (Evans et al., 2010; Schlossberg, 1984,1995,2011). Strategies represent the individual's coping responses which can help them to understand the transition event underway, develop multiple strategies or mechanisms for changing a problem/modifying a situation (for example gathering information from a lecturer about a poor grade to take action which would positively change the next outcome) and/or managing their perceptions about or reactions to stressful life events and transitions.

Although the Schlossberg transition theory has been praised for being a model "highly integrative of other theoretical contributions, and conceptually and operationally sound" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 225), it has also been critiqued for building on theoretical perspectives which were developed by researchers in contexts which lacked diversity. Other criticisms of the theory include a lack of research and a formal assessment tool to evaluate its validity.

Despite these weaknesses, Schlossberg's transition theory continues to be applied in higher education research (Adams & Breneiser, 2018; Roybal et al., 2021) and it is a valuable theory for a deeper understanding of how students experience and cope with change. Its use in this study will guide interpretation of findings.

METHODOLOGY

Action Research Process & Previous Cycles of Learning

Frequently used in educational settings action research study designs allow education practitioners, administrators, and teachers to conduct rigorous research in their local settings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This act of conducting inquiry into one's practice is useful to gain an understanding of a local problem and to develop practical solutions to problems and/or empower practitioners to make incremental improvements to our profession (Ivankova, 2015, Mertler, 2020). The action research process is reflexive and unfolds in a continuous cycle of planning, acting, evaluating and the action plan is the primary distinctive characteristic of action research (Mertler, 2020).

As a result of low student participation in annual new students' orientation at the Turkeyen campus of the University of Guyana, action research was utilized to investigate this observed problem of practice. Consequently, through two previous cycles of research, it was found that it was difficult for students to attend daily scheduled orientations either due to work commitments, the cost of travel over long distances and/or incomplete admissions processing. Students also reported opting out of attending orientation in the absence of a mandatory requirement. Furthermore, despite non-attendance students did not perceive any adverse impact on their adjustment to the university environment. The sample sizes were small during these two phases. In Cycle 0 qualitative data was collected from two students who were purposively sampled. In cycle

1 using mixed methods action research, 13 students were conveniently sampled using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

However, changes in the local context directly impacted and improved the problem. Consequently, through careful reflection, the next cycle of research, cycle 2 represented a return to the diagnostic phase to investigate the impact, if any, of the UG orientation program. Findings will be utilized to inform an action plan. See Appendix E for a summary of key findings from Cycles 0 and 1. The next sections describes the design and findings of a third cycle of research.

Research Design

This study attempted to determine students' perceived utility of the current new students' orientation program at the University of Guyana (UG) and to determine the effect, if any, of students' attendance on their academic performance and/or later involvement in extracurricular aspects of campus life. In addition, through this study, data was extrapolated from the Students' Records Management System (SRMS) to create an overview of students in respect of their demographic characteristics, first-year retention and academic performance to be used as a guide for improving the current first-rear transition programming intervention.

A multiple methods action research study design was used to gather students' feedback about the new students' orientation program. Action research studies are frequently conducted in educational settings to investigate a local problem of practice with a view to implementing practical improvement and solutions to address the problem

(Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The use of multiple methods in action research offers a flexible approach to collect and analyze data, using either qualitative and/or quantitative methods. This approach can be used to gain a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of a problem or issue, and to develop more effective solutions (Brewer & Hunter, 2006).

In this multiple methods action research study, two types of quantitative and one type of qualitative data collection methods were employed, these included an online questionnaire to survey current students (N=9342), document review of three (03) types of students' statistical records and reports (the admitted applicants demographics report, the complete withdrawal report, and the broadsheet performance report) obtained from the UG students' records management system (SRMS), and semi-structured follow-up interviews with ten (10) students. The use of multiple methods also allowed for triangulation of findings across methods which in turn should serve to increase the validity and reliability of the findings of this study. The design was complementary between the types of data collected as well as the methods employed for analyses.

Data Collection Procedure

Following the Arizona State University's Institutional Review Board's approval for the conduct of this study and other requisite permissions from the institution where the study was conducted, the assistance of the Technical Online Support (TOS) office was solicited to disseminate (mass distribution), a prepared email introduction of the study, and a link to the Qualtrics survey instrument for students' optional participation in

the study. Students were required to consent to participation *prior* to accessing the survey. Students who did not consent to participation were redirected away.

The email was dispatched to the undergraduate student population (N=9342) who were enrolled in the first semester of the current academic year (2022/2023). The survey remained open for 3 weeks and reminder emails were dispatched weekly until closure. Data collection followed a QUAN +QUAL sequence. The quantitative findings were analyzed first, thereafter qualitative data stemming from semi-structured interviews with students (survey respondents who opted to be contacted further) was collected and analyzed.

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data findings was performed using a careful series of steps to compare the findings. Themes, patterns and/or contradictions in the findings were identified. This facilitated confirmation of findings and/or lent explanation to the data collected. For example, when students were asked to rate an aspect of the orientation program in the questionnaire utilizing Likert-type scales, the findings, whether positive, negative, or neutral were compared with the interview transcripts to identify similarities, differences and/or responses which provided deeper insight regarding the general findings on the same topic from the quantitative phase and data which was previously analyzed. Triangulation also allowed for identification of data outliers.

Participants and Instrumentation

Survey

Participants. The study population comprised all currently enrolled undergraduate students (N=9342), irrespective of orientation attendance in their first year of studies. A convenience sample was used. Participation in the survey was voluntary and the online survey tool utilized was set to ensure participants were only allowed to submit their questionnaire once. This approach eliminated duplication, allowed for the broadest sample, and enhanced the probability that all students from the undergraduate population were permitted an equal opportunity to be included in the study. A sample between 5 and 10 percent of the undergraduate student population was the research aim. The response rate was 4.73 percent. Four hundred and forty-two (442) students filled and submitted responses. Following data cleaning to exclude questionnaires which were incomplete below 50 percent, the final sample comprised four hundred and nine (409) filled questionnaires.

Instrument. A questionnaire was developed by the researcher using Qualtrics software. The complete instrument is detailed in Appendix A. Prior to the distribution of this instrument to the undergraduate student population, it was piloted with two (2) current undergraduate students to ascertain whether the items were easy to understand and whether the estimated time to complete (20 minutes), was feasible, the latter being a concern given that the questionnaire comprised six (6) sections. Through that process, it was found that there was ambiguity between two questions, these were revised. It was also that the instrument could be completed in the projected time.

Section one of the questionnaire featured eight closed-ended questions which were designed to gather information on the respondent's demographic and background attributes. Responses were sought regarding age and gender, however, questions regarding the students' parental higher education status, and ethnic group were included to gather information which may be utilized to enhance aspects of the orientation program to cater to the needs of special groups in the population. Section two of the questionnaire was designed to ascertain the respondents' personal experience with the current orientation program. Five closed-ended questions focused on establishing whether students attended a program of orientation in their initial year of studies and the activities they chose to engage with if they had. Respondents who indicated that they did not attend orientation were redirected to give reasons for same. Section three of the questionnaire featured two questions, one close-ended and one five item Likert scale: 1= "Extremely Stressful", 2= "Stressful", 3= "Moderately Stressful", 4= "Minimal Stress", 5= "Not stressful at all". These two questions were designed to have respondents reflect and advise how they viewed their transition to university (whether positive negative or neutrally) and to elaborate on aspects of their personal situation at the time which may explain their responses given. Section four comprised four close ended questions which allowed respondents to self-report on their academic performance at the end of their first year and overall. This section was also designed to solicit information on the respondents' level of student engagement in extracurriculars. Sections five and six addressed the theme of utility of the current orientation programming. On a five item

Likert scale, students were asked to articulate their assessments of the orientation as a support and/or in helping them to develop strategies to navigate university, especially as they transitioned. Each scale was assigned a specific value to facilitate data analysis, the values for which are shown in Table 1. The statements in sections five and six were categorized to correspond with the ‘supports’ and ‘strategies’ aspects of the Schlossberg 4 ‘S’ model.

Table 1

Survey Items Used to Assess Usefulness of the Orientation

Usefulness of Orientation Likert scale used 1=Not at all useful, 2 = Slightly useful, 3 = Moderately useful, 4 = Very useful 5 = Extremely useful
1. Introduction to Moodle 2. Money Matters 3. Introduction to the Library & Academic Writing 4. On campus/online Student Clubs Exposition 5. Campus tour activity 6. The Students' Tech toolkit & Cyber-security 7. Registry & You Sessions
Usefulness of Orientation Likert scale used 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Somewhat agree, 5 = Strongly agree.
a. Orientation as a Support for Navigating First-Year 1. Orientation was useful as a support to first year students. 2. Orientation was useful for learning about non-academic support services (Housing, Counseling, Medical etc.) available. 3. Orientation was useful for learning about academic support and services (Library, lecturers, student tutors etc.) available. 4. Some Orientation activities were tailored to include and provide information to students' external support network (e.g., parents, spouse, etc.)
b. Orientation as a Strategy for Navigating First-Year. 1. The orientation program provided useful information regarding financing tuition fees. 2. The orientation program provided adequate resource materials for follow up with services, if needed. 3. The orientation program topics were useful to navigating the university's teaching and learning online applications (Moodle, zoom etc.). 4. Attending orientation helped manage expectations and anxieties about attending the university. 5. Attending orientation introduced strategies which proved useful to establishing or expanding control over stressful aspects of the transition.

Document Review of Existing Statistical Data (SRMS Student Records)

A recent period, 2017 through 2021, was identified as the period through which a summary demographic profile and related progress of the students at the university would be explored based on our student data. With requisite permission, statistical data and reports were extracted from the University's student information system (the SRMS) for analysis. The reports which were accessed from the Turkeyen Campus database included the admitted applicants' demographics report for the period, broad sheet academic performance reports, and students' withdrawal reports. These reports provided statistical data which facilitated analyses of student demographics, their retention rate, retention to third year and how they were performing academically at the end of their first year of studies.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Students were invited through the questionnaire survey phase to volunteer (through a close ended question regarding willingness to participate in a follow up interview) to be interviewed. Based on responses, ten (10) survey respondents were purposively sampled for interview. Orientation attendance was the criterion applied to determine the sample population of interviewees. Students who reported attending orientation were selected as the best group to facilitate expanded explanations of their survey responses, which in turn could enhance the study's findings with rich descriptive data and help the institution develop a more useful, supportive orientation program and strategy. These interviews were conducted online using the Zoom meeting platform.

Interviewees signed interview consent forms and gave oral consent for the audio of the interviews to be recorded. There was no requirement for cameras to be on. Interviews were conducted over a period of four weeks and the duration of each interview was thirty minutes on average.

Protocol –Semi-structured Interview. The interview protocol was developed to elicit narrative from students on their perspectives of the usefulness of the new student orientation program. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix B. Students were asked to indicate their understanding of the purpose of the program, whether the program was found to be useful and why, whether the program helped them to develop strategies to ease their transition into university, and whether they viewed the program as a support giving reasons.

Data Analyses

Survey

A total of 442 students completed and returned the questionnaires. The final sample comprised 409 completed questionnaires after data cleaning was performed to remove questionnaires where respondents filled in less than 50% of the questions. Numeric codes (99 and 999) were used for incomplete questionnaires to create a consistent way of representing missing data in the dataset, making it easier to analyze the data and interpret the results. The survey data was analyzed using SPSS v. 27. Descriptive statistical analyses (frequency, mean, mode, and standard deviation) were performed to evaluate respondents' demographics and views about the program's

usefulness. Furthermore, inferential statistical analyses (*t*-tests) were performed to examine any significant differences in academic or social outcomes between students who attended orientation and students who did not attend orientation. The *t*-tests were performed using students' self-reported data from the questionnaire about students' grade point averages and involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Document Review of Existing Statistical Data (SRMS Student Records)

Data extracted from the student database (Student Records Management System) was de-identified where necessary before analysis. Descriptive statistical analyses (frequency, mean, mode, and standard deviation) were also performed to evaluate respondents' demographics and to determine trends in students' retention and their academic performance over the period 2017/2018-2020/2021. Three types of reports were utilized to extrapolate study data, specifically the admitted applicants' report, the complete withdrawal report, and the broadsheet detailed report. The admitted applicants' reports for the period under review, provided demographic student data for students who were admitted. The complete withdrawal reports for the period under review provided data on the number of students who withdrew from their programs. The broadsheet detailed reports for the period under review provided data on students' grade point averages (GPA). All data obtained from the three types of reports was cleaned to isolate undergraduate student data for analysis.

To determine the first-year rate of retention in this study, the number of first-year students who withdrew was subtracted from the total number of first-year students who

enrolled. The result was divided by the total number of first-year students who enrolled, and the outcome multiplied by 100. The total number of students who withdrew comprised the sum of students who withdrew in the year of admission as well as those who did not return or withdrew the following year from the same cohort of students. This approach for calculation of the rate of retention was applied to each first-year cohort for academic period being examined in this study (2017/2018-2020/2021). Thereafter, aggregate averages of first-year student retention were reported for the period under review.

Students' first-year grade point averages (GPAs) were examined from the broadsheet detailed reports. Trends were organized and reported in the findings to correspond to the institutional performance scale, where 0-1.9 indicate a 'fail', 2.0-2.6 indicate a 'pass', 2.7-3.3 indicate a 'pass with credit', and 3.4-4.0 indicate a 'pass with distinction'.

Semi-structured interviews

Thereafter, analysis of qualitative data was conducted with the objective of providing deeper explanations of quantitative findings. Thematic analysis (TA) was employed to explore the interview data collected. Analysis of the qualitative data was conducted following the Braun and Clark (2006) approach to thematic analysis to code the data, develop, refine, and define themes.

To begin the process, interview transcripts were generated using Zoom's automatic transcription feature, but manual transcription became necessary due to inaccuracies in the transcripts. This was attributed to the limitation of the program in distinguishing the accent and dialect of the researcher and interviewees. Transcription was therefore a protracted process, over 4 weeks, due to the need to take breaks and transcribe in small chunks. However, this allowed the researcher to become familiar with the interview data and to informally commence coding during the transcription process.

Thereafter, interview transcripts were hand-coded to formally develop initial codes. Hand analysis of qualitative data allows the researcher to get close to the data and may be employed in cases based on the researcher's preference and availability of time to commit to the labor-intensive process of marking the data by hand, color coding, and dividing it into parts (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Interesting and relevant data features from the interview transcripts were manually coded based on articulated phrases which conveyed both overt and latent meaning. For example, if students indicated that they found the orientation program useful because it was easier to attend online, all similar articulations or expressions in the data set were coded as "Orientation was useful" and "Accessibility of the NSO program" as an underlying situational reason for the response(s) given. This method of coding was helpful for identifying what sessions of the orientation program students were most interested in and why. It also allowed exploration of the transcript dataset in an inductive open-ended way. The codes were then compared

to Schlossberg's 4 'S' variables and explored for applicable relevance to that conceptual framework.

After coding the dataset, the most frequent codes were sorted and grouped into a table using the Microsoft Office Word program, for the development of potential themes and sub-themes with corresponding data extracts. Braun and Clark (2006) argue that themes are actively developed, rather than passively discovered, in data analysis. To reduce the number of codes and combine them under themes, the data was analyzed by actively comparing the codes to identify relationships and patterns between them. The frequency of each code was analyzed to identify those that were more prevalent and recurrent throughout the data. This process was repeated after taking a break, approximately 1 week, to further refine the themes and ensure that they aligned with the coded data extracts.

In the remaining stages of the analysis the themes were named and defined to ensure that each one was clear. The use of sub-themes helped to define the concepts within an overarching theme. For example, an overarching theme 'creating college-going knowledge' was developed, and was defined by 3 sub-themes, specifically 'introduction to the university and support resources', 'student engagement and connection with faculty or peers', and 'development of agency' that the ways in which the new student orientation

Through the steps outlined above themes were actively developed which were then linked to the Schlossberg Transition 4 S factors.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand, from the students' perspective, the usefulness of the UG new student orientation program. The following three research questions guided the study:

RQ1 What can I learn about the demographic composition and academic progress of the students, admitted between 2017-2021 to the Turkeyen campus, University of Guyana, to improve delivery and effective impact of the new students' orientation program?

RQ2 How can I use student feedback about the usefulness of the UG NSO to improve the program at the Turkeyen campus, University of Guyana?

RQ3 How can I use current students' feedback about their academic performance and social integration to develop targeted ways to increase orientation participation at the University of Guyana, Turkeyen campus?

In this section I will present the findings of the survey, document review and semi-structured student interviews. The survey questionnaire, which was distributed to all undergraduate students (N=9,342) of the Turkeyen campus, featured 23 questions. There were four hundred and forty-four respondents, two of whom declined to proceed with the survey. Thirty- three questionnaires were completed with less than fifty percent of the questions answered, as a result those questionnaires were removed from the data set. Four hundred and nine remaining questionnaires comprised the final sample population (n = 409) and data set utilized for analyses of the survey results in the Statistical Package for

Social Sciences (SPSS) V.27. Analyses run in SPSS included frequencies and independent samples *t*-tests. I also reviewed various data reports (specifically the admitted applicants' demographics report 2017/2018 – 2020/2021, the broadsheet academic performance reports 2017/2018 – 2020/2021, and graduation reports 2019/2020 – 2020/2021) from the UG Students' Records Management System (SRMS) and conducted semi-structured interviews with ten (10) students, to answer the research questions. Data collected from SRMS was analyzed in MS Excel and thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interviews.

The results of the data analyzed are presented in the following order: 1) demographic profile of UG students and related academic progress, 2) usefulness of the orientation to UG students, and 3) the extent of usefulness of orientation attendance to academic performance and social integration of students.

Research Question 1: Demographic Profile & Related Academic Progress

This section details trends of relevant student demographics and related student progress (measured in terms of first year Grade Point Average (GPA) academic performance, first year student retention, and retention to third year) data which was collected to address the first research question.

Demographic Profile

The questionnaire requested students to provide information on the highest level of education obtained by their parents. This question was included in the survey to gather information on an aspect of the students' social background which may explain their

adjustment to university and predict their retention. Presently, students are not required to provide this information to the institution. There was a 100% response rate to this question. Most students, 72% of the sample, reported that the highest level of education obtained by their parents was non-tertiary. Therefore, this meant that most UG students were first-generation.

Furthermore, 27% of the sample indicated that their parents obtained at least an undergraduate degree qualification. Four students, 1% of the respondents, indicated that their parent(s) commenced tertiary education but failed to complete. These findings revealed that most students who completed the survey were first-generation meaning the first person in their family to attend university. Globally, first-generation student enrollments into university are growing rapidly (Gesing & Glass, 2018). Data extrapolated from the UG SRMS which was informative about the social background of the students included marital and employment status. Data trends showed that in the period reviewed (2017/2018-2020/2021), on average 87% of the student population indicated their marital status as 'single' and on average almost half of the population (41%) was employed. Data was not available regarding full-time or part-time status of employment.

Findings on students' citizenship, gender, age range and geographic home regions were similar when the questionnaire data was compared with the data trends of the admitted applicants' report for the period 2017/2018 through 2020/2021. For example, both data sets showed that 99.3% of the students who were enrolled at the

institution were Guyanese, and therefore less than 1% made up the international student population. Further, the survey revealed that 78.4% of students responding identified as female whilst the SRMS data showed that 62% of first-year students were also female.

The gap in gender enrollments and studentship at UG can be explained by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (n.d.) reports that notes that in 2020, female students completing upper secondary (grades 10-12) in Guyana outnumber male students by 14.4%. Further, globally it is reported that women are attending and completing college at higher rates than their male peers (Renn & Reason, 2021; Ishler, 2005).

Survey respondents were presented with additional options to self-identify in respect of gender. Results showed that 0.2% identified as 'non-binary' (i.e., not relating to, composed of, or involving just two genders only), 0.7% as 'Other' and 1.7% selected 'Prefer Not to Say.' There was no comparable data from the SRMS, due to current institutional data collection practices, which only provide closed-ended options of either 'Male' or 'Female' to categorize gender. This finding, although small, is important because the literature informs that changing demographics of college students extends to gender identity and there may be the possibility of overlooking ways through orientation to connect with and introduce support for minority populations (Renn &Reason, 2021).

The largest proportion of students were found to reside in the densely populated urban coastland of the country, specifically 77% of the survey respondents listed Regions 3 and/or 4 as their home region and similarly, data from the SRMS, showed that on

average 78% of student enrollments were from Regions 3 and 4. Research shows a correlation between the supply of higher education and urban places of residence.

Marginson et al. (2020) advise that there are reciprocal relationships between high social demand for entry to higher education, lower operational costs per student in the supply of same and, the provision of jobs for graduates in urban settings. Findings showed that the lowest student enrollments (under 5 percent annually) were from the Hinterland (rural) regions 1, 7, 8 and 9, which may be an indicator of access. Additionally, students' age-ranges were comparable as well, with a substantial number of students in the age range 16-25 based on the survey responses and the SRMS data (69% and 71% respectively). Table 2 below illustrates key demographic data findings amongst students who were interviewed as well for this study.

Table 2

Demographic Profile of Interview Participants

ID	Sex	Age	Citizenship	Region	Parents' Level of Education	Study year	Program	Employment Status	Prev. Tertiary Program
001	Female	46 and over	Guyanese	Four	Senior Primary	Final	B.Soc.Sc. Social Work	Employed	Dip. Pub. Mgt
002	Male	16-25	Guyanese	Four	Secondary	First	B.Sc. Supply Chain Mgt	Employed	None
003	Female	36-45	Guyanese	Four	Unknown	Final	BSc. Med. Lab. Sc.	Employed	none
004	Female	26-35	Guyanese	Four	Secondary	First	B.Soc.Sc. Pub Mgt	Employed	None
005	Female	26-35	Guyanese	Four	Secondary	First	B.Sc. Mgt.	Self-employed	Assoc. Art Tourism
006	Male	16-25	Guyanese	Three	Secondary	First	BSc. Information Tech.	Unemployed	None
007	Female	26-35	Guyanese	One	Secondary	Second	BSc. Agriculture	Unemployed	None
008	Female	16-25	Guyanese	Six	Tertiary	Third	BSc. Geography	Unemployed	None

009	Female	16-25	Guyanese	Four	Tertiary	Third	BSc. Biology	Employed	ASc. Biology
010	Female	26-35	Guyanese	Four	Secondary	Second	Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery	Unemployed	B.Sc. Biology

Note. Regions: One – Barima/Waini (Hinterland); Three – Essequibo Islds/West Dem. (Coastland); Four -Demerara/Mahaica (Coastland); Six – East Berbice/Corentyne (Upper Coastland)

Except for demographic data on parents' level of education, and extended gender categories beyond the traditional binary options of male or female, the demographic profile of the survey and interview sample populations was representative of the UG student population when compared with trends identified in the enrollment data from the student database.

Based on the above findings, it can be interpreted that the UG student population is comprised of young adults up to age 25. This finding is congruent with national census data and international country profile data on the population age and school-aged distributions which shows that the bulk of the population, that is 70.9 percent are under 40 years old with more than half of that percentage comprising the school-aged population (Bureau of Statistics, 2012; UNESCO Institute of Statistics, n.d.).

Furthermore, the institution was found to be providing a service for a sizable number of persons who did not enroll immediately after secondary school (at least 35% of students who entered university, for the first time, were found to be aged 26 and olde whose needs for support in the transition to university are likely to differ from the younger entrants. This applies as well to the sizable percentage (over 50%) of students who were found to be employed and attending classes. Yet another relevant demographic

finding was that across the board, most students were first in their families to pursue tertiary level education.

There was also clear overrepresentation of females compared with males entering university annually which is a direct reproduction of the gender gap in secondary school leavers (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, n.d.). Finally, geographic region of residence was a relevant finding given the overrepresentation of students from the lower coastal areas which may be an indicator, in part, of socioeconomic barriers to accessing tertiary education in those areas. Whilst academic, administrative, and social preparation for university may be necessary for all new students, transition programming tailored to the needs of students based on attributes which place students at a disadvantage, may improve the desired success outcomes for the students as well as the institution.

The next section details the progression findings on students' academic performance, specifically their Grade Point Average (GPA), first to second year retention rates and the first to third year retention rates for students who were enrolled in degree programs.

Academic Performance – Grade Point Average (GPA)

Students were asked in the survey to self-report their first year and overall academic performance (measuring GPA only). Three hundred and six students answered this question. To provide context regarding these findings, in the UG classification system, a GPA of < 2.0 represents fail, 2.0 to 2.6 represents 'Pass,' 2.7 to 3.3 represents 'Pass with Credit' and, 3.4 to 4.0 represents 'Pass with Distinction.' A GPA of 2.0 is the

minimum needed to graduate for all undergraduate programs, therefore, it is considered and referred to in the institution as the minimum critical GPA.

The analysis showed 8.7% of survey respondents reported that their GPA was below 2.0 at the end of their first year of studies. Seventy-three percent of respondents self-reported GPA scores ranging between 2.7 and 4.0 at the end of their first year of studies and 91.3% of respondents self-reported completing their first year of studies with a GPA of at least 2.0. 36.1% of survey respondents self-reported first-year GPA ranging between 3.4 and 4.0. Conversely, based on the UG SRMS Broadsheet reports (a record of students' courses, grades, and GPA by year and cumulatively), GPA trends in the first-year performance of students who were enrolled between 2017 and 2021, showed that on average 21% of students tended to obtain scores ranging from 0 to 1.9, which falls below the minimum critical GPA.

In addition, 49% tended to obtain scores ranging between 2.7 and 4.0 at the end of their first year of studies and on average 79% of students obtained first-year GPA scores of at least 2.0. Within these data trends findings also showed that a much smaller percentage, (17% of students) when compared with the self-reported first-year academic performance data, achieved GPA scores ranging from 3.4 to 4.0 at the end of their first-year studies. See Appendix C for complete data findings from the SRMS on academic performance of students at the end of the first year. Assessing students' academic achievement in the first year of studies is important because initial academic success,

specifically first year college GPA predicts retention and a GPA of 2.0 or higher increases the probability that a student will be retained (Reason, 2003).

Retention – First to Second Year

To answer the second half of the first research question, analyses of the UG SRMS admitted applicants' demographics reports 2017/2018-2020/2021 showed an average first year retention rate of 82% at the Turkeyen campus. The UG retention rate can be benchmarked regionally and internationally: the undergraduate retention rates for the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine (UWI STA). campus for the period 2015/2016 -2019/2020, was 79%; the United States National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that in fall 2019, for first-time, full-time degree-seeking undergraduate students who enrolled in 4-year degree-granting institutions, the retention rate in fall 2020 was 82%. Similarly, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2023) which reports a five-year trend from 2014/2015 – 2019/2020 of young and mature full-time, first-degree entrants who did not continue past the first year of study 19.32%, making the average .overall first year retention for the period 81%.

When these findings are disaggregated, it was found that the average first year retention rate in Degree programs was 84% whilst in the Associate Degree, Diploma and/or Certificate programs the rate was slightly lower at 79%. See Appendix D for a table illustrating these findings. Student attrition from college or university is highest

between the first- and second year following enrollment (Tinto, 1993, 2012; Ishler, 2005). The findings above detailed a strong and consistent rate of retention for the institution is that is comparable in the region and further afield.

Retention to third year

Further, data obtained from the UG SRMS admitted applicants' demographics reports for the period 2017/2018-2020/2021, students' retention to the third year of studies was also examined for students who were enrolled in the straight four-year baccalaureate programs. Only faculties with straight four-year degree programs were included in the determination of persistence. A total of 24 programs (14% of total undergraduate programs at UG) from five faculties were examined.

The number of students enrolled in the third year of the programs was divided by the number of students who were enrolled in the first year then multiplied by 100 for a percentage result. Enrollment was determined provided that the students submitted registration requests in each succeeding year after the first year, up to and including the third year and provided that their registration status did not reflect 'withdrawn completely.' Findings showed that on average 71% of students were retained to the third year of studies for the stated period. However, caution is advised in generalizing this finding, since it only applies to a small percentage of four-year degree programs at the institution.

Summary

Survey findings revealed that most students who enrolled in programs at the institution were first-generation tertiary students, meaning that secondary level education was most frequently reported to be the highest level of education for the parents of survey respondents. It was also found that more than half of our students are working and attending school. Female student enrollments disproportionately outnumbered their male counterparts, and most students were found to be in the 16 – 25 age brackets. Findings also showed that geographically most students attending UG identified the Coastland (urban) regions as their regions of residence. It was found that the lowest student enrollments (under 5 percent annually) were from the Hinterland regions 1, 7, 8 and 9.

Examination of data from the UG Students' Records Management System (SRMS) revealed trends in the academic progression of students. Findings showed that most students obtain GPAs above the minimum critical score at the end of their first year. 82% of UG students were retained from first to second year and the first-year retention rate was higher for students who enrolled in undergraduate degree programs compared with those who were enrolled in undergraduate programs at the associate degree, diploma, and certificate levels. The orientation program may be improved to connect with and support students' transition to UG in ways particular to their demographic attributes and to institutional student success goals such as retention.

Research Question 2: Usefulness of UG's Orientation

Research findings in this section relate to the second research question which sought to determine students' assessments on the usefulness of the orientation program. These findings represent analyses of data collected from the survey and the semi-structured interviews with students.

Findings showed that more than half of students prioritized attending orientation. For example, within the survey data set (n=409), two hundred and sixty-six students (65%) reported attending an orientation activity in their first year. Of those attendees, 60.1% indicated that the type of orientation attended was an online session and 63.8 % attended both the general and faculty levels of orientation programs. Ten (10) students were interviewed. Nine (09) of those students attended orientation. Students surveyed who indicated that they did not attend orientation selected 'Awaiting Admissions' and 'Scheduling conflict with work or previous engagement' as the top reasons for their non-attendance to orientation.

The lone student interviewed who did not attend orientation attributed her absence to scheduling conflict. From these findings, it may be determined that students regarded the orientation program to be important given the rates of attendance. Further, given the percentage of respondents who indicated attending an online type of orientation it may be concluded that those students commenced studies within the past three years. Finally, these findings may also be interpreted to mean that the scheduling of orientation,

typically hosted during the day, remains a key factor in students' decisions and/or ability to participate fully.

Based on overwhelmingly positive findings, it was found that overall students assessed the orientation program to be useful. For example, using a 5-point Likert scale, (Strongly agree = 5 to Strongly disagree = 1), students were asked about the usefulness of orientation, when the program was framed as a form of support for accessing information and resources as well as a strategy managing the transition to tertiary education. The rate of response to each item/statement on this question was no less than 71% of the total students (n=266) who indicated earlier in the survey that they attended orientation. Table 3 below illustrates these findings. Most respondents (52%) 'strongly agreed' (average Likert scale score > 4.0) that orientation was useful as a support to them in their first year. Students also responded on the positive end of the Likert scale, which was 'somewhat agree' to 'strongly agree,' that as a support, the orientation was useful for the provision of information on available non-academic or academic resources and services. In contrast, most students (81%), were ambivalent in their responses when asked if orientation served as a support for providing information and resources to their external support network (e.g., family). The average Likert scale scores on this item was 3, indicating students 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the statement.

Table 3

Students' Perspectives of the Usefulness of Orientation as a Support

Items	No. Students	N	Mean	Mode	*SD*[a]
Orientation was useful as a support to first year students.	223	266	4.32	5	0.87
Orientation was useful for learning about non-academic support services (Housing, Counseling, Medical etc.) available.	219	266	3.79	5	1.1
Orientation was useful for learning about academic support and services (Library, lecturers, student tutors etc.) available.	216	266	4.21	5	0.88
Some Orientation activities were tailored to include and provide information to students' external support network (e.g., parents, spouse, etc.).	216	266	3.3	3	1.22
The orientation program provided useful information regarding financing tuition fees	202	266	4.16	5	1.09
The orientation program provided adequate resource materials for follow up with services, if needed	198	266	4.02	5	1.02
Usefulness as strategy for navigating teaching and learning env.	193	266	4.1	5	1.04
Attending orientation helped manage expectations and anxieties about attending the university	190	266	3.62	4[b]	1.21
Attending orientation introduced strategies which proved useful to establishing or expanding control over stressful aspects of the transition	194	266	3.52	4	1.22

Note: Likert scale 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Somewhat agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

[a] *SD* = Standard Deviation. [b]Multiple Modes exist. Smallest value is shown.

Similarly, data findings from the interviews revealed that students found the orientation program to be useful. For example, when asked how the orientation program factored into their transition into the university, interviewees described pre-existing

emotions of fear of the unknown, ignorance about processes, uncertainty about what to expect from university, and personal concerns which led to feelings of anxiety.

Against that background, students described the orientation as being 'helpful,' 'informative,' and 'calming.' Interviewee H, a female third year Geography degree major, aged 16-25, informed that:

> At first I was a bit fearful of going into UG, you know because a lot of times you hear it's such a difficult place and um lecturers would give you a hard time, and all of that… but honestly, in my experience, that's been a very fruitful one, and I think the orientation it really helped me to be more calm. Because listening to the different, I think it was 5 days or 6 days of different programs, but listening to all of the different speakers, and so on it really it calmed me, in a sense, because I was fearful before.

Other interviewees expressed similar sentiments. Interviewee D, a female first year Public Management degree major, aged 26-35 stated "well at first I wasn't sure what to expect from UG, so the orientation actually allowed me to get a peek at what university life is like". Interviewee F, a male first year Information Technology degree major, aged 16-25 advised "[at] first, I had no idea what I was doing, so the process was very helpful", and Interviewee J, a female first year, medical degree student summarized that "the orientation basically allow[ed] me to have a feel of what to expect".

Based on the forgoing, UG students in this research study, who attended orientation, assessed the orientation program to be useful. That assessment was supported by data collected from the interviews. These findings were thematically summarized as 'Management of Expectations' where students clearly described their emotional states at the time of beginning studies, then related those to precise impact of the program, which

ranged from filling gaps in information, allaying fears to managing anxieties about what to expect from UG.

To gain better insight and more robustly describe students' assessments about the program using a 5-point Likert scale, (Extremely useful = 5 to Not at all useful =1), students were asked to indicate which aspects of the program (sessions held) they found most useful. Table 4 below illustrates the findings. On average students scored five out of the seven identified sessions as very useful. High average Likert scale scores (> 3.5), indicating their responses were on the positive end of the Likert scale, 'Very to Extremely useful,' characterized students' assessments about all program sessions except the campus tour and the extra-curricular sessions.

The 'Campus Tour' and 'Extra-curricular' sessions showed medium average scale scores (3.2), indicating that students found those orientation sessions 'Moderately useful.' Campus tours were not offered in 2020 and 2021. In 2022 only three faculties planned and offered tours during orientation week. Attendance has never been mandatory. Further, it was interesting to note that the rates of response regarding the usefulness of those sessions and the 'students' tech toolkit' sessions were well below 40% of the total respondents (n=266).

Table 4

Students' Perspectives of the Usefulness of Orientation Sessions Attended

Usefulness of Orientation sessions	No. Students					
	Valid	Missing	Total	Mean	Mode	*SD*[a]
Introduction to learning platform (Moodle) & other on lining tools.	131	135	266	4.02	4.00[b]	.94
Money Matters	108	158	266	4.03	5.00	1.02
Library Introduction & Acd. Writing.	131	135	266	3.85	4.00	1.10
Introduction to Clubs/Extra curriculars	95	171	266	3.22	3.00	1.18
Campus Tour	48	218	266	3.29	5.00	1.35
Students' Tech Toolkit	42	224	266	3.67	5.00	1.26
Registry & you	136	130	266	3.71	4.00	1.09

Note. Likert scale 1=Not at all useful, 2 = Slightly useful, 3 = Moderately useful, 4 = Very useful 5 = Extremely useful

[a] *SD* = Standard Deviation.

[b]Multiple Modes exist. Smallest value is shown.

In their interview responses, students advised which sessions were most useful to them and why. Therefore, in their responses, students recalled sessions which helped their understanding of academic expectations, eased their academic transition and/or provided information which was useful to accessing resources and navigating administrative processes. These findings were thematically summarized as helping students to create college going knowledge. For example, speaking on the utility of the

library session, Interviewee B, a male, first year, Supply Chain Management degree major aged 16-25, said “I attended the one on plagiarism [Library session]. I was working right, so I was in and out, in and out most of the time. But I think the one I stayed the longest was the one on plagiarism. It just gave me a feel of, you know, what I was getting into”. Interviewee E, a female, first year degree student majoring in Management, aged 26-35, found the orientation useful for communicating academic expectations to students:

> What is expected when you’re at the tertiary level, which was another important discussion. Um dealing with classes, dealing with lecturers…I do believe that for me it was really useful because I had a really good semester. Knowing or getting the understanding of what is expected by lecturers, the classes um you know having this online discipline, they touched a little bit on it and being able to get that information early was like a preview to the classes. It really did help a lot for me.

Interviewee G, a female, second year General Agriculture degree major aged 26-35 advised that for her the session which introduced the online learning system was just in time and most valuable “It was very useful, because I mean I didn't know how to log into SRMS [the student portal]. I didn't know about the Moodle [the teaching platform] I didn’t know.”

Interviewees 004 and 008 articulated their partiality to the ‘Money Matters’ orientation session. Interviewee D expressed “I asked a lot of questions, as it relates to the payment plan. I was mostly interested in that aspect of it, because I want to pay as I study” and Interviewee H explained “I was a bit fearful about the money and the most well, the most impactful item that they had during the 6 days was the money matters, because, I think it was, [name given], he was talking about the money matters, and that he

explained how you could pay in installments and that was such a relief to me". These findings underscore gaps in knowledge, for these students, in the preparation to attend university. It highlights the importance and practicality therefore of the first-year orientation program at the institution. Moreover, apart from Interviewee H, these statements were made by students who were the first in their family to attend university. Extant research shows that first generation students are underprepared in college going knowledge and competencies (Gable, 2021; Havlik et al., 2017; Reid & Moore, 2008).

Yet another theme, 'Convenience' was developed to capture students' assessments about the usefulness of the orientation program. Apart from the content covered in the various sessions, students added their views about the delivery of the orientation program, which were described both positively and negatively. It was found that students who were straddling full-time jobs and attending university, preferred the online delivery format because it provided flexibility for them to join and to engage in the various sessions whilst at work. Specifically, Interviewee A, a female student majoring in Social Work degree, employed full-time and in the age bracket 46 and over, expressed:

> Getting into university at this age was a little (*pause),* you know, challenging because you had to like go on campus, feel your way through. It was a little bit confusing because at that time you would [have to] go into a different classrooms for the orientation… and so you would have been all around campus looking for this particular orientation, [with] the online orientation, you're there [remotely/at work] and you have the um login and it was a little bit more easier because in that way even though you're at work you could login, have your headset on and you could still pay attention. But with the face-to-face, you would have had to get the permission say if you're working, to go to the orientation.

Interviewee A experienced orientation on the campus given a previous enrollment in a Diploma undergraduate program which impacted her perspective and expression of preference for the online format for the program. Interviewee G also expressed “I took advantage of it [orientation and classes] being online. Because as I said before, I have a young child. My child was only a year, so it being online, was ideal for me.”

Students also expressed concerns about the convenience of the time and location of the events. For instance, Interviewee C, a female student, in her final year of studies in the Medical Lab Sciences degree program, whose first year was in 2015/2016, articulated issues with the time and the requirement to be present at the institution to order to participate due to her being employed in her first year, “the time of the orientation wasn’t convenient for me. And at that time, it was on campus.” Interviewee B, who explained that he was at work during the session he attended, recommended having “wider time” offerings for the program such as in the evening as well. Convenience therefore was found to be an important prerequisite associated with students’ attendance more so for those who were employed.

Summary

On a 5-point Likert-scale question with options ranging from ‘Strongly agree' to ‘Strongly disagree’, most respondents ‘strongly agreed’ that orientation was useful as a support to them in their first year. Temporal and spatial considerations in hosting orientation are key factors in students’ decisions and/or ability to participate fully. Most students found orientation program sessions which eased academic and functional

transitions as most useful. Exceptions particularly related to usefulness of the 'Campus Tour' session may be explained by the students' year of enrollment. Campus tours were not offered post-pandemic up to 2021. Qualitative findings gave further insight regarding students' assessment of the program's utility. Students' articulation of the usefulness was summarized under three themes. These were 'Management of Expectations,' 'Convenience' and 'Creating College-going Knowledge.'

Findings of this study provide evidence that students who were the first in their family to attend university articulated their partiality to the program sessions addressing financial matters, given personal anxieties or concerns. Overall, students commonly communicated that UG's orientation was useful in providing information which served them later either in academic matters and/or just in time to navigate administrative processes.

Research Question 3: Impact of Orientation Attendance on Academic and Social Integration

Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted using the survey data to determine if self-reported first year GPA, self-reported overall/cumulative GPA, and the self-reported number of extra-curriculars with which students engaged was statistically different between students who attended orientation and those who did not. Finally, students who were interviewed were asked questions to evaluate their social integration into the campus. Those questions focused on extra-curricular involvement and friendships formed. Findings are detailed below.

Orientation Attendance & Self-Reported GPA

The mean self-reported first year GPA of students who attended orientation (M=3.11, SD=.91) was compared to the mean self-reported first year GPA of students who did not attend orientation (M=2.79, SD=.99). There was a statistically significant difference in self-reported first year GPA of students who attended orientation and the first year GPA of those who did not attend orientation, ($t308= 2.81$, $p < .05$, $d = -0.3$) however, the Cohen's *d* effect size indicate that the differences in GPA performance was small. This means that on average orientation attendance was associated with 34% better self-reported GPA scores for first year performance. In other words, students who attended orientation reported first-year academic performance which was slightly better than students who did not attend orientation.

Conversely, the mean self-reported overall GPA of students who attended orientation (M=3.10, SD =.83) was compared to the mean self-reported overall GPA of students who did not attend orientation (M=2.97, SD =.95). The average overall GPA of students who attended orientation was not significantly different from self-reported overall GPA of students who did not attend orientation, ($t_{304} = -1.23$, $p > .05$, $d = .15$). The results indicate there was no statistical difference in self-reported overall academic performance between those who attended orientation and those who did not attend orientation over the duration of studies.

Permzadian and Credé (2016) in a meta-analysis of quantitative research on the effectiveness of first year seminars to improve first year grades and 1-year student

retention, found a small positive effect on both outcomes albeit a stronger positive correlation for the latter. A subsequent study (Culver & Bowman, 2020) found no impact of first year seminars on student success outcomes except student satisfaction. Researchers attribute the divergent findings to study design and moderating variables such as race/ethnicity, gender, pre-college academic performance, institutional characteristics (such as size, or selectivity) and/or seminar related characteristics (such as format, duration, or instructors).

Given that this study used a simple ex post facto design pairing self-reported GPA performance and orientation attendance, caution is advised in interpretation of the findings since self-reported data was utilized. However, Kuncel et al. (2005) following a metanalytical study of past research to review the validity of using self-reported GPAs among other academic performance variables, found that this kind of self-reported data was a valid measure of academic achievement thus suitable for research purposes if there is caution in the interpretation of findings.

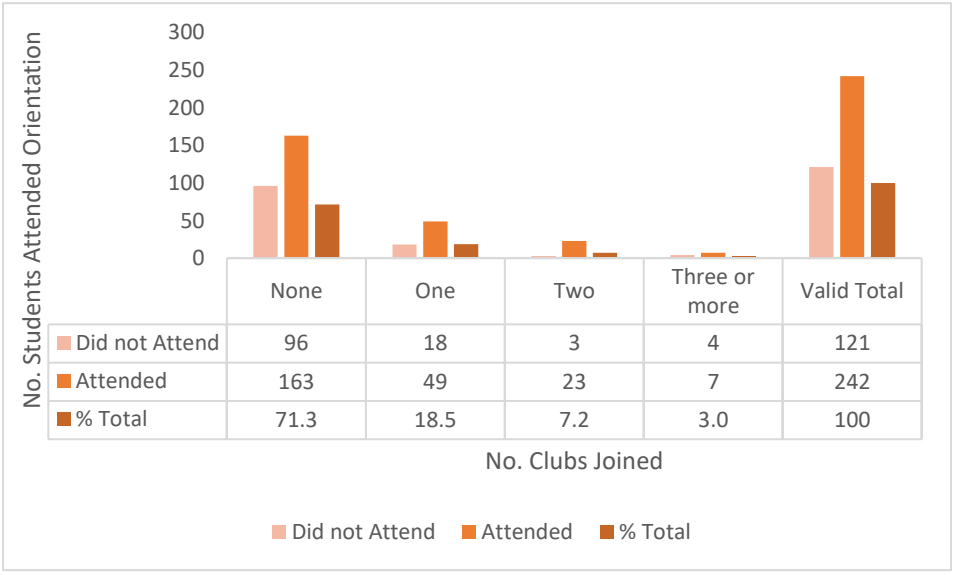
Moreover, based on their findings self-reported grades or grade point averages are typically representative of the actual grades, particularly when being reported by older students (e.g., college) and students whose academic achievements were high. Nevertheless, based on the analyses undertaken using the self-reported data, the findings support earlier research showing that little to no impact on students' GPA based on orientation attendance. Where there was a small observed effect, it was only applicable in the first year of studies. Limitations regarding the accuracy of the self-reported data

underscores a need for systematic and by extension reliable data collection on orientation attendance for all students.

Students were asked questions to evaluate their social integration into the campus. In the survey, students were asked to indicate the number of extracurricular clubs joined. Following up in the interviews, students were asked to indicate whether the orientation program sessions introduced them to ways they could become involved in campus life apart from classes and peer-led students' support. Questions were posed as well in the interviews to determine generally if new friendships were formed in their transition to UG. Figure 2 below illustrates that most students (71.3%) indicated on the survey that they did not join any type of extra-curricular club/association irrespective of orientation attendance. The response rate for this question was 88% of the total number of students who completed the survey (n=409).

Figure 2

Comparison of Orientation Attendance & Self-Report on Number of Clubs Joined



	None	One	Two	Three or more	Valid Total
Did not Attend	96	18	3	4	121
Attended	163	49	23	7	242
% Total	71.3	18.5	7.2	3.0	100

Orientation and Number of Self-Reported Extra-curriculars

Independent sample t-tests were also conducted. Results showed a statistically significant difference in the uptake of extra-curricular activities between those who attended orientation and those who did not. The mean self-reported number of extra-curriculars for students who attended orientation (M=1.48, SD=.79) was compared with the mean self-reported number of extra-curricular activities of students who did not attend orientation (M=1.30, SD=.68). There was a statistically significant difference in the average self-reported number of extra-curriculars with which students who attended orientation engaged ($t_{273.21} = -2.28$, $p < .05$, $d = .24$). Cohen's *d* indicated that the size of the differences was small. In fact, descriptive statistical analyses found the differences to be comparable except in the case of students who self-reported joining two clubs, where there was a percentage difference of 7% between the two groups in favor of those who attended orientation.

Students were also asked via the survey to indicate the type of club that they joined, however, the survey response and completion rate for that question was low (<100 valid responses). Therefore, analyses (i.e., *t*-tests) were not conducted.

Students who were interviewed advised that through the orientation program, they learnt about peer-led support and extra-curricular engagement options. However, only four students (40%) reported joining any clubs or making use of peer-led support for tutoring and mentoring. This apparent low student engagement with clubs may be explained by students' perceptions and attitudes regarding extra-curricular activities.

Responses suggested students' perceptions about the purpose of extra-curricular activities was that it was recreational, a distraction from their academic purpose, sports-related, required in-person interaction and/or would have required a time commitment which was not feasible.

> Interviewee F: It's very nice, very fun to be a part of the activities and so
>
> Interviewee H: I'm in my third year right now and within my first and second years I did not get involved in a lot of extracurricular activities because of…you know…trying to ensure that you get all the 'As' and being careful of not getting 'As' if you're too involved in those additional activities.
>
> Interviewee D: I mean I did hear about it, but I am not going to say I took it to heart eh? Cause I'm not an athletics person.
>
> Interviewee H: I thought, at the moment, that okay, if I'm involved, I would have to be on campus at some points and at that time we were predominantly online. So, I said 'OK, I won't be able to fully participate in these activities
>
> Interviewee C: I learnt of them, but I was never, I never had the time to do it …I never had the time to be engaged in those things."

These findings suggest that students whilst describing general awareness about extracurriculars, did not perceive involvement in non-academic pursuits to be beneficial in their academic goal orientation.

One exception was found in Interviewee F who expressed enthusiasm about early extracurricular engagement as well as a desire to continue. "I'm a part of the cyber security club. It's very nice, very fun to be a part of the activities and so. Actually, they currently consider me one of the most active members of the club…so hopefully I get into the executive body too soon."

Students were asked to indicate if they formed new friendships in their transition year to the institution and/or maintained previous relationships. Responses revealed that most students (70%), aged 16-25 (4 students) and 26-35 (3 students) formed new friendships in their first year although this was not facilitated by the orientation program. One student, Interviewee J, described the role friends played in her transition as "building community". However, it was found that friendships were primarily developed and centered around academic support and pursuits:

> Interviewee F: Well unlike high school friends, they [new friends at UG] played a big role [in transition]. If I am late for classes, they would call and remind me. And most of the time when we have assignment groups and so we end up picking each other so you know we're working together already.
>
> Interviewee I: It was [making new friends] easy, quite surprisingly. Most of my friends from UG, it started out like working on group projects and we just hang out. One of my best friends in UG we started out working on like Bio projects together and we grew closer working on a project for the science fair.
>
> Interviewee J: But everyone we kinda' find the persons who we worked well with in group assignments. Even to this day in Med school I'm still with those people because they showed me that they work well and that they can produce a work that is my qualities so I'm keeping those friends.

Students' descriptions regarding connections to old friendships revealed that in instances where there was no sense or feeling of loss and/or separation, "Well I wouldn't say I had any close close friends in high school. I mean I do conversate with them from time to time, but it wasn't really something to keep" (Interviewee F). Another student related "So yeah I did meet persons from high school but because I wasn't 'social' I would say in high school I guess we didn't really talk much" (Interviewee J).

In other instances, although students described separation with some regret, their responses suggested acceptance or understanding that there were changes in the level of contact and/or connectedness with old friends. For example, Interviewee I, a female third year degree student majoring in Biology, said:

> I have always been a very introverted person and I truly say this I truly have like 5 friends (chuckles). And I do maintain a good relationship with most of them, love each other, it's just some of them I don't really you know see them to speak to them like we used to. But if ever there was a time that we needed each other we're there. Everyone is just busy now.

Another student, Interviewee H, said,

> Yeah. In terms of like talking, I still speak with them. It's more like how's work? [or] how's UG? cause we're at different places in life so some of my experiences they can't relate to and vice-versa.

In the student retention literature, it has been empirically established that both academic and social support, social involvement or engagement are positively correlated with student retention, particularly in the critical first year (Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016; Bai & Pan, 2010, Pascarella et al., 2005; Lotkowski et al., 2006, Tinto, 1993, 2012, Wilcox, 2005). The *t*-test findings regarding students' social integration with UG utilizing club participation as the sole indicator, suggests attending orientation increases the likelihood that of students joining student groups or club, in turn benefitting from the social supports which may positively impact retention. Once again caution is advised in the interpretation of the *t*-test findings given that same was conducted utilizing self-reported data in this study. Here too, the need for and benefit of systematic tracking of students who attend orientation is evident.

Summary

There was a statistically significant difference in students' self-reported GPA in their first year of studies and in their social integration, measured in this study by the number of extra-curricular clubs they joined, based on their orientation attendance. Cohen's *d* effect in both instances was small and descriptive statistical analyses revealed that in every instance the differences, between the two groups' club uptake, were comparable except for students who reported joining at least two clubs. Descriptive analysis of the survey data found that most students did not join a student club. There was no statistical difference in overall GPA between groups.

The low uptake in students' engagement through student clubs appears to be mediated by making new friends at UG. Most students who were interviewed reported making new friends notwithstanding differences in orientation attendance. Through their descriptions of peer interactions, it was determined that academic support and encouragement was at the core of friendships developed. Three students did not describe their connections to old friendships which existed prior to their university transition, with any sense of loss. There were, however, other testimonies where close friendships were fondly recalled and described as being maintained albeit with the acknowledgment that there was reduced contact. Two students described limitations in understanding each other's post-secondary experiences due to differences in commitments and life pathways (see Interviewee H's articulation above).

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Using a combination of student survey data, university administrative data and student interviews, this study explored the usefulness of the new student orientation program and described key demographic characteristics as well as related progression of students at the University of Guyana's Turkeyen campus. This section will therefore present a discussion of the findings, guided by the conceptual frame of the Schlossberg transition theory and the 4 'S' coping model, and suggest implications for practice.

The intent of the first research question of this study was to determine who our students were and to assess how they were progressing in the first and critical year following their enrollment. Knowing our students is an important foundational step for the design of any new students' orientation program as the students' background characteristics interacts with previous experiences as well as the experiences within the college or university environment to influence students' success outcomes (Jacobs, 2010; Kuh et al., 2006).

Demographic findings of this study revealed a profile of UG students who were young (aged 16- 25), first in their families to pursue tertiary studies, female, working and studying full time Guyanese who resided mainly in the urban Coastland regions. In contrast study findings showed proportional under representations in the profile of students in the areas of foreign students, male students, students from Hinterland regions and students who self-identified racially as Amerindian (Indigenous). Whilst noting that some demographic findings such as age, gender, race, and geographic distributions were

not dissimilar from the national population distributions, as of the 2012 national census (Bureau of Statistics, 2012), it was evident that there were overlapping and layered demographic characteristics within the UG student population.

These intersections are not unusual as Renn & Reason (2021) reminds us that students rarely fit into a single identity group and that the intersections of their various background characteristics and identities influence their perceptions of experiences and/or programmatic interventions. Also underscoring the importance of background characteristics, Schlossberg introduced the factor 'Self' as either an asset or liability for first, defining an event or non-event as a transition then second, for coping with that transition (such as the transition into university, in the context of this study). This factor 'Self' encapsulates variables which define a person's sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity) and their psychosocial resources (e.g., ego development, self-efficacy, outlook).

Schlossberg (2011) posits that surviving and coping with transitions depends on resources within an individual outweighing their personal liabilities whether the transition represents an individual 'moving in' such as starting a new job or college, 'moving through' such as finding satisfaction within a current role/organization or 'moving out' such as graduation or retirement. This argument was made without prescribing any optimal combination of demographic characteristics or psychosocial resources for attaining a successful transition experience. Whilst this study has extrapolated useful data which can be used to inform a profile of UG students, it must be noted that it is not a

complete sociodemographic profile nor data was collected to comprehensively assess students' psychosocial resources. This was due to limitations in the available data (there is no current requirement at UG for students to provide socioeconomic data such as parent's annual income) and design of the questionnaire survey (questions on students' satisfaction, perceptions of self-efficacy and attitudes were not included/measured in the survey).

Notwithstanding this incomplete picture of the UG students, a key demographic finding of this study was that most of our students are enrolling as first-generation tertiary students. This finding was consistent even in interaction with other demographic variables such as age and gender. This finding is important, given predictions in the global context that growth in first-time entrants to tertiary education will continue for the next decade (Marginson et al., 2020) and in the local context the university's own strategic goal of one graduate per household by 2040 (University of Guyana Blueprint 2040, 2019). This finding places into perspective a sociodemographic characteristic of UG students which has been established through decades of research as a disadvantage given that first-generation students typically approach university or college with preparation deficits which adversely impacts their adjustment to and navigation of the higher education environment. (Terenzini et al., 1996; Choy. 2001; Stewart et al., 2015; Ishitani, 2016; Gibbons et al., 2019).

First generation students are therefore considered amongst the students most at risk for not attaining desired success outcomes. This knowledge about our students as

well as intersections with other variables of the 'Self', for example, first-generation status frequently intersects and correlates with other demographic variables which may be liabilities such as a low-income background and minority race/ethnic identities (Renn & Reason, 2021), should be applied to tailor the content in orientation sessions and activities. The study's findings on students' 1st-year progression of students add to the knowledge about our students. Findings revealed an undergraduate first-year retention rate of 82% which was comparable to a large regional university campus and rates of retention reported for colleges and universities in the UK and US. Whilst useful for purposes such as benchmarking institutional performance both regionally and internationally, these progression findings may be best analyzed in conjunction with the students' sociodemographic characteristics and psychosocial resources discussed above to inform targeted first year interventions to influence student success.

Such correlational analyses were beyond the scope of the current study. Trends in academic performance in the first year revealed that on average 79% of students successfully complete the year. This rate of academic achievement is comparable to and may explain the findings regarding 1 year retention. Finally, the observed variance between students' self-reported GPA scores and actual trends in first-year student GPAs obtained from the SRMS may be explained by the timing of the survey, which was distributed at the end of the first semester of the academic year. Respondents in their first year of studies (44 percent of the sample population) would not have had a completed year of grades to indicate a first-year GPA. Their scores reported were likely to change.

However, the average trends reported from the SRMS were collated based on actual first-year GPA scores spanning a four-year period (2017/2018-2020/2021). Assessing academic performance over a longer term (annually) is a clear implication for practice.

The purpose of the second research question was to determine whether the orientation program was useful to students in their transition to the university. Students' assessments of the program were positive, particularly in framing the orientation as a support that was helpful and informative. In navigating or coping with transitions, Schlossberg identified support as a critical factor for a successful outcome which may emanate from friends, family, intimate relationships and/or institutions/communities (Evans et al., 1998). Schlossberg (2011) asserted that the support available during a transition significantly impacts one's well-being whereby the presence or absence of that support may positively advance or slow down adjustment to a new role and environment.

It should be noted that no specific combination of support sources was prescribed for greater effectiveness. Interviews which followed the survey, expanded the findings on usefulness of the orientation program through students' narrative descriptions. These descriptions offered insight into why the program was assessed to be useful. In sum, students advised that the present orientation program offered practical assistance needed initially to navigate the new environment which in turn impacted their emotional well-being during their first-year transition to UG. For example, students' described perceptions about the institution and personal anxieties surrounding gaps in their own

knowledge about the tertiary environment which were altered through their participation in the program.

Students also indicated that orientation introduced campus support services such as guidance and counselling and provided information on opportunities for social engagement with peers. The findings of this study therefore suggests that the UG orientation program typically fulfills the general purpose of such programs by providing essential information and support for new students in their initial transition to the institution (Cueso, 1997; Jacobs, 2010; Mack, 2010; Walcott et al., 2020).

Despite this general assessment of utility, in some cases students expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of the program specifically, the length which Interviewee D conveyed can be monotonous "Bring it down to 4 days. To be honest people get bored quick…it should be a little bit more exciting," the timing, and the absence of campus tours (tours were impacted by campus closure due to pandemic). One student even recommended virtual tours until such time that there was full resumption of in-person classes. A need highlighted as well was the option to access the sessions asynchronously, especially for students who were unable to attend.

Finally, the purpose of the third research question was to measure the effect, if any, of orientation attendance on students' academic performance and social integration to the institution. Findings showed statistically significant positive outcomes in students' self-reported first-year GPA as well as their self-reported engagement with student clubs based on orientation attendance. In both instances, the effect sizes were small. These

findings may be interpreted, albeit with caution given the use of self-reported data (Kuncel et al., 2005), and the likelihood that there may be other responsible factors not studied in the iteration of research, to mean that generally the UG orientation program was positively associated with two outcomes that are known predictors of first year persistence and retention (Kuh et al., 2008; Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011; Stewart et al., 2015).

There have been several research studies on the effects of orientation program participation and students' success outcomes. One body of research suggests that orientation programs can be an effective way to promote student success. The findings of this study converge with previous research studies which showed statistically significant yet small effects on GPA and student engagement. It is important to note as well that there may be practical significance notwithstanding small Cohen's *d* effect findings of this study when applied to first-year GPAs whereby an increase in GPA decimal points by at least 0.30 represents the difference between failing or passing the first year of studies.

Whilst the findings of this study suggest positive outcomes in the UG context, more research is needed using actual rather than self-reported data for more conclusive findings. Considering the findings which showed no statistically significant effect on students self-reported overall GPAs, this may be explained by previous research studies which found that correlations with success outcomes were strongest when temporally more proximal to the orientation programs or first-year seminars such as in the first year

(Permzadian & Credé, 2016;). Further, Permzadian and Credé (2016) reminds us that these types of programs may only have an effect helping students overcome difficulties adjusting to college, usually during the 'moving in' stage rather than impacting more immutable individual attributes in students such as their academic preparedness, personality, or levels of intelligence.

Possible implications for practice to address these issues may be a more integrated and longer-term approach (e.g., second year orientation) to the orientation program whereby the program is paired with other student support interventions such as academic advising, tutoring, mentoring and co-curricular activities for a more holistic and impactful experience (Culver & Bowman, 2020; Kuh et al., 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016). Finally, findings regarding the absence of overall impact on self-reported GPAs may be explained by a contrasting body of research which suggests that beyond providing college satisfaction, these programs provide little to no impact on academic or retention outcomes (Culver and Bowman, 2020).

Orientation attendance and the orientation period was not found to impact or be the point of introduction for students meeting peers and/or interacting to form new friendships, particularly for students who enrolled during the period 2020 to 2022. However, it was determined based on questionnaire responses and students' descriptions during the interviews that the program impacted their awareness about the options for extra-curricular engagement activities and student clubs even if they did not sign up. Moreover, this study revealed that students formed friendships stemming from academic

engagement activities with peers in their transition year rather than from initial contact with peers during the orientation period. It may be interpreted that the ‘Situation’ at the time of enrollment for most students who responded to the questionnaire (84% of respondents reported their year of study as first, second or third year) was a limitation which curtailed in-person interactions.

The global pandemic which commenced in 2020 resulted in a virtual delivery format for orientation week, virtual classes, and hybrid classes (skewed more to virtual delivery) in the years following 2020. This situational circumstance would have been beyond the students’ control and may explain, in part, not just the missed opportunity to meet, interact and form friendships with peers during the orientation period but also the observed low engagement with student clubs post orientation week, irrespective of attendance. Schlossberg (2011) advised that situational variables associated with transitions such as concurrent stressors (the transition itself whether anticipated or not still likely to be a source of stress), triggers, timing, control over the change impacts the ease or lack thereof experienced by individuals in a transition. This coping factor may therefore partially explain the study’s findings regarding orientation attendance and social integration. Furthermore, there are no empirical studies or findings to indicate that prior to 2020, attending the orientation program was positively associated with joining student clubs and/or forming new friendships in the first year. Future research or a systematic mechanism for post-orientation evaluations of the program could provide this type of baseline evidence. Lastly, a student’s recommendation in this study to “make it more

exciting" suggests a need for more socially interactive activities during the period which in turn should provide the foundation for greater student engagement with peers and faculty.

The study's findings that students formed new friendships at university especially after working in learning groups for classroom projects and activities may be explained by a few key reasons. First, Tinto (2012) advises, notwithstanding conceptual differences between academic involvement (characterized by meaningful and validating contact with faculty and peers in the classroom) and social involvement, the two activities 'overlap and influence each other' (p. 65).

Students' attitudes and perceptions about the nature and value of extracurriculars showed that whilst aware of options for social engagement, they viewed those activities as non-essential to their academic pursuits. However, academic engagement with peers in learning and/or coursework assignment groups appears to have fostered social engagement for some students and the benefits of support known to accrue from peer-to-peer interactions (Kuh et al., 2008; Lotkowski et.al., 2004).

Peer support identified through friendships for some students as well as engagement with students for other students represented yet another form of support that UG students were able to access in coping with their transition and adjustment to the tertiary environment. Second, a key contextual dynamic which should not be overlooked given that it pre-dated the campus closure due to the global pandemic is that UG students are primarily non-resident and commute daily to campus. There is evidence that

commuter tertiary students are not typically as involved with nor attached to the institution (Holloway-Friesen, 2018).

Although this study provides valuable insight regarding orientation and students' social integration to the institution, the findings should be interpreted with caution given the narrow variables which were utilized to be indicators of student engagement and integration as well as the use of self-reported data on engagement with clubs. Further research should explore the effect, if any, of orientation attendance on social integration utilizing other behavioral, affective, and cognitive indicators of said engagement such as student-faculty interaction, students' feelings of belonging and satisfaction with the environment and assessment of learning. Here too, the findings may be more conclusive with the use of actual data on students' engagement with clubs and other forms of extracurricular activities.

Overall, the research findings of this study suggest that the UG orientation program was positively associated with academic and social outcomes which predict students' success outcomes, particularly retention. It was found that the program provided support for the students in their adjustment to their new learning and social environment which whilst useful for all first-year students, may have been more impactful for the sizable percentage of students revealed in the study to be first-generation university students. This assumption is based on previous research which proved differential positive effects based on student characteristics such as first-generation status and other socio-demographic characteristics typically correlated with that status (Culver & Bowman, 2020; Mayhew et

al., 2010; Permzadian & Credé, 2016; Lotkowski et.al., 2004). This finding converged with Schlossberg's theory regarding the influence of background characteristics on transitions.

The study also revealed situational variables which may have impacted students' social engagement. It may be interpreted that even within this different institutional and demographic context, the 'Support' coping factor of Schlossberg's transition theory was strongly demonstrated.

Despite the valuable insights gained in this study orientation programs should not be viewed as a panacea for achieving students' success outcomes given that there will always be factors which vary contextually and interact to impact the outcome such as program type and program implementation (usually affecting duration, delivery format, content, target population etc.), student characteristics, institution type, and the design of the research study (Culver & Bowman, 2020; Mayhew et al., 2010; Permzadian & Credé, 2016; Lotkowski, et.al., 2004).

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CHAPTER 3

Investigating the usefulness of a new student orientation program for improving student transitions to university: A study at a small university in South America.

ABSTRACT

Orientation is a crucial part of helping students transition to university. It provides students with an opportunity to learn about the campus, meet new people, and get acclimated to the academic and social expectations of higher education. A well-designed orientation program can help students feel more comfortable and confident about starting university or college. The purpose of this article is to present findings regarding students' assessments of the usefulness of an existing new students' orientation program at a small public university in an English-speaking South American country.

Background

This study was conducted at the main campus of a national public university in Guyana, South America in the first semester of the academic year 2022/2023. Approximately 10,000 students are enrolled in programs at that institution. There are nine Faculties and Schools offering over 100 majors in undergraduate studies. All programs offered are full time, however evening scheduling in some programs caters to students who are employed. Program time for undergraduate baccalaureate programs is typically four (4) years with a few known exceptions. Finally, apart from the main student government body, there are approximately twenty (20) student clubs and societies which offer extra-curricular engagement activities for students. Prior to the COVID-19

pandemic which resulted in the closure of the university's campuses, students primarily commuted to campus. However, during this study and at present, classes and services were offered initially fully online and later in a hybrid mode where necessary. This change in the conduct of affairs extended to impact hosting of undergraduate new students' orientation in a synchronous online delivery format, for the first time in the institution's history.

Characteristics of the UG New Students' Orientation Program

Orientation events are held at two main levels, campus-wide for all students, also known as the general orientation and within Faculties and Schools targeted at students enrolled in program within a given Faculty/School. General orientation events are the responsibility of the Students' Welfare Services department. Attending orientation is not mandatory. Content typically included in the general (campus-wide level) of the new student orientation sessions was designed to help students to navigate the campus environment, introduce support services and resources, communicate academic expectations, and introduce student life enrichment communities. Whilst the program does not focus heavily on developing academic skills, the content addresses university level writing, library usage skills, and academic integrity expectations. The sessions are grouped and delivered as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5

Characteristics of the General Level of Orientation Program Events

Description of Orientation Events	Program Delivery Details		
	Duration	Timeframe	Resource Personnel
Campus Tour (offered prior to AY 2020/2021).	Four to five days.	9AM-4PM	Senior students.
Introduction to Clubs/Extra curriculars	One day.	12PM -5PM	Student clubs. Sports unit.
Introduction to learning platform (Moodle) & other on lining tools	One day.	9AM –2PM.	Technical Services staff, Faculty Lecturers.
Introduction to Library & Academic Writing.	One day.	9AM – 12PM.	University Librarians, Faculty Lecturers.
Money Matters.	One day.	9AM – 12PM.	Bursary Personnel, Loan Agency Officers, Deputy Registrar.
Registry & You.	Four to Five days.	9AM – 12PM.	University Registrar, Assistant Registrars, Counselling Officers, Medical Officers, Campus Security & Safety Officers.
Students' Tech toolkit.	One day.	9AM -12PM.	Faculty Lecturers.

All orientation events occur daily in the first week of the semester, a week that is reserved in the Academic Calendar for this purpose. Administrators and academic staff deliver lecture-styled presentations followed by interactive questions and answers sessions with the new students. The institutional approach to new students' orientation fits induction type activities, meaning first contact with students during week one of the semester in a series of short, focused events (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). At present there is no formal post-event evaluation form to gather attendees' feedback about their

experience and/or satisfaction with the program. Furthermore, orientation practices at the university have been guided by informal knowledge and previous practices rather than by theory or empirical research addressing the effect of these programs and the impact of various other factors on how well students will transition into and succeed in university. Moreover, orientation programming at this institution has not been explicitly driven by or tied to institutional goals linked to retaining students or fostering students' academic success and ultimate satisfaction with their choice of institution and program(s) of study. For these reasons, a study was designed to empirically establish background context about students' (their sociodemographic characteristics and academic progression at the university) and to measure, post-hoc, the usefulness of the general (campus-wide level) new students' orientation .program for the first time in institutional history. This article presents the design and findings about the usefulness of the program as current students have advised. The following research questions guided this aspect of the study:

RQ.1 How can I use student feedback about the usefulness of the new students' orientation to improve the program at the University campus?

RQ.2 How can I use current students' feedback about their academic performance and social integration to develop targeted ways to increase orientation participation at the University campus?

The following hypotheses were developed for application to the second research question listed above:

H_0 There is no statistically significant difference in academic performance (grade point averages - GPAs) in the first year, between students who attended orientation and students who did not.

H_1 There is a statistically significant difference in academic performance (grade point averages - GPAs) in the first year, between students who attended orientation and students who did not.

H_0 There is no statistically significant difference in students' overall academic performance (grade point averages - GPAs) for students who attended orientation and students who did not.

H_2 There is a statistically significant difference in students' overall academic performance (grade point averages - GPAs) for students who attended orientation and students who did not.

H_0 There is no statistically significant difference in the extra-curricular engagement for students who attended orientation and students who did not.

H_3 There is a statistically significant difference in the extra-curricular engagement for students who attended orientation and students who did not.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Students' Adjustment to College

Beginning college or university is a life event that is often both exciting and stressful for the individual embarking on the journey regardless of differences in their preparation. Seminal research studies on students' adjustment to college found that students who experienced more stress during the transition to college were less likely to adjust well and revealed that some of the most common factors which influence adjustment include academic, social, and personal factors (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Kuh & Love, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Students who fail to adjust to the university or college environment experience loneliness, academic stress, social anxiety and are at greater risk for early departure (Tinto, 1993).

Related to the failure to successfully negotiate the transition to college, the literature tells us that student attrition from college or university is highest between the first- and second year following enrollment (Tinto, 1993, 2012; Ishler, 2005). Therefore, timing institutional action to coincide with the student's first year of college to promote students' success and mitigate departure will result in the greatest gains for the university related to student retention (Tinto, 2012).

Adjustment to college is also predictive of two students' success outcomes: grades and retention both directly and indirectly (Credé & Niehorster). Failure to adjust academically results in poor academic performance which in turn may negatively impact social and personal areas of a student's life. Moreover, Credé and Niehorster (2012) highlight that poor academic performance may indirectly impact retention whereby the

student may depart from the university either voluntarily or involuntarily. However, students are more likely to depart a university or college because of failed social integration with the institution (Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Tinto, 2012). It is important for students to be aware of the potential stressors of college and to develop suitable coping mechanisms, particularly in the critical period when transitioning to university.

Orientation Programs

Orientation programs are amongst several institutional interventions which have been employed in the first and critical year of university to assist with students' transition and adjustment to the tertiary environment. Mack (2010) traces the first orientation-type program to Boston University in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. University orientation programs (both traditional and extended types) and first-year seminars and/or courses (contemporary taught courses focused on developing students' academic skills) are today normative in higher educational institutions, since its first appearance. (Foote, 2010; Ward-Roof & Guthrie, 2010). However, the content, duration, and design format of orientation programs differ amongst higher educational institutions (Chan, 2019; Culver & Bowman, 2020; Foote, 2010; Mack, 2010).

First year seminars were developed from early orientation programs (Foote, 2010) Whilst there is overlap in the goals and purpose of these programs, key differences between the two. First year seminars are offered either semester-long or year-long are typically structured as a taught credit-bearing course with content focused on developing academic skills in students whereas orientation programs are induction type events typically offered in the weeks preceding the start of the academic year or during the first

week of classes. Orientation program content is usually focused on introducing students to the campus environment, support services, institution policies and regulations. These programs provide opportunities for interaction with faculty, staff, and students. Finally, extended orientation programs offer hybrid type content focused on "facilitating students' adjustment to college" (Culver & Bowman, 2020, p. 286).

Depending on the institutional objectives for the outcome of orientation program, the hybrid extended orientation type program may offer both types of content with emphasis placed on one type over the other (Culver & Bowman, 2020). Research exploring the effect of Orientation Programs on Students' Success are plentiful, yet findings remain mixed. Previous studies have found that orientation programs can have a positive impact on a variety of student success outcomes, (Lotkowski et.al., 2004).

Conversely, in a recent meta-analytic review of research studies measuring the impact of first year seminars and college students' success researchers Culver and Bowman (2020) found that whilst first-year seminars had a positive impact on student satisfaction with college, there were no significant impact on grades, retention, or graduation. There were however differential effects in that study for groups of students based on race/ethnicity, whereby first year seminars directly improved the academic performance of Black students, gender, and prior academic performance. These mixed findings highlight that there are factors which may vary contextually and interact to impact the outcome such as program type and program implementation (usually affecting duration, delivery format, content, target population etc.), student characteristics,

institution type, and the design of the research study (Culver & Bowman, 2020; Mayhew et al., 2010; Permzadian & Credé, 2016; Lotkowski et.al., 2004).

The Schlossberg Theory of Transition and 4 'S' Coping Factors

The Schlossberg Theory of transition (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984) proffers the idea that transitions are a part of life events which may either be unanticipated, anticipated or non-events--the "non-occurrence of anticipated events" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). How well and whether individuals cope with and navigate these life events depends on the interaction of four factors which function as assets or liabilities (Schlossberg, 1984).

Those four factors are articulated in a model called the 4 'S' Model for coping with transitions, the transition Situation, the psychological and demographic characteristics of the individual or variables within the Self, available Support resources to the individual experiencing the transition and knowledge and application of coping Strategies. Situational variables, such as the timing of the transition, trigger of the transition and the individual's perception of control over the situation are variables which may inform preferred or effective coping methods (Schlossberg, 1981, 1995). Variables of the "Self" refer to the psychological resources (psychosocial outlook, ego development, self-efficacy, values and/or emotional maturity) and other demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity) an individual which may impact their perception of a transition event. Support factors includes three types of social support which, if available, plays a critical role to ensure the likelihood of a successful transition . Finally, strategies represent the individual's coping responses, skills or techniques which can help them to understand the transition

event underway, develop ways for managing their attitudes towards the transition event. Over the years the theory has been described as comprehensive in its consideration of the interaction of individual and environmental variables to explain how adults navigate various changes in their lives (Evans et al., 2010). However, this theory has been critiqued as well for building on theoretical perspectives which were developed by researchers in contexts which lacked diversity and for itself being insufficiently evaluated as well as for being primarily applied to research in homogenous environment contexts (Evans et al., 2010). However, there is evidence of more applications of this theory in college contexts research studies which show promise. For example, Roybal et al. (2010) in an assessment of practical lessons converting an in-person orientation to a virtual one used the Schlossberg Transition Theory to guide the design of events which would offer new students support transitioning to a virtual environment. Another study by Adams and Breneiser (2018), used Schlossberg's transition theory. Findings revealed that students' attitude and anxiety significantly impacted their adjustment to college and therefore recommended providing targeted orientation interventions to help students develop positive coping strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to determine students' perceived utility of the current new students' orientation program at a small South American university and to determine the effect, if any, of students' attendance on their academic performance and/or later involvement in extracurricular aspects of campus life. to be used as a guide for improving the current first-year transition programming intervention.

A multiple methods action research study design was used to gather students' feedback about the new students' orientation program.

The study was conducted in an ethical manner. Institutional review board approval was obtained from the study site and the Arizona State University. Informed consent was also obtained from participants where it was conveyed that participation was voluntary and without penalty.

Data Collection Procedure

Following the Arizona State University's Institutional Review Board's approval for the conduct of this study and other requisite permissions from the institution where the study was conducted, the assistance of the Technical Online Support (TOS) office was solicited to disseminate in bulk, a prepared email introduction of the study, and a link to the Qualtrics survey instrument for students' optional participation in the study. Students were required to consent to participation *prior* to accessing the survey. Students who did not consent to participation were redirected away. The email was dispatched to the undergraduate student population (N=9342) who were enrolled in the first semester of the

current academic year (2022/2023). The survey remained open for 3 weeks and reminder emails were dispatched weekly until closure. The quantitative data was collected and analyzed first, thereafter qualitative data stemming from semi-structured interviews with students (survey respondents who opted to be contacted further) was collected and analyzed. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data findings was performed to compare the findings. Similarities and differences between the findings from the two types of data helped to identify areas of convergence and divergence in the data. Thereafter, the research questions were reexamined along with the data findings to comprehensively interpret data. This facilitated confirmation of findings and/or lent explanation to the data collected. For example, when students were asked to rate an aspect of the orientation program in the questionnaire utilizing Likert-type scales, the findings, whether positive, negative, or neutral were compared with the interview transcripts to identify similarities, differences and/or responses which provided deeper insight regarding the general findings on the same topic from the quantitative phase and data which was previously analyzed. Triangulation also allowed for identification of data outliers. For example, most students articulated a preference and appreciation for the accessibility and convenience which the online format of the orientation program provided, except for a traditional-aged student, just out of high school who in his interview described looking forward to the on-campus traditional student experience.

Participants and Instrumentation

Survey

Participants. The study population comprised all currently enrolled undergraduate students (N=9342), irrespective of orientation attendance in their first year of studies. The sample was conveniently taken, given that there was acceptance of all completed questionnaires. A sample between 5 and 10 percent of the undergraduate student population was the research aim. The response rate was 4.73 percent.

Instrument. The questionnaire used was developed using Qualtrics software. The questionnaire featured six sections and a total of 23 questions both close ended and Likert type scale. The main items on the questionnaire which directly address the usefulness of the orientation are shown in Table 6 below .

Table 6

Survey Items Used to Assess Usefulness of the Orientation

Usefulness of Orientation Likert scale used 1=Not at all useful, 2 = Slightly useful, 3 = Moderately useful, 4 = Very useful 5 = Extremely useful
1. Introduction to Moodle 2. Money Matters 3. Introduction to the Library & Academic Writing 4. On campus/online Student Clubs Exposition 5. Campus tour activity 6. The Students' Tech toolkit & Cyber-security 7. Registry & You Sessions
Usefulness of Orientation Likert scale used 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Somewhat agree, 5 = Strongly agree.
c. Orientation as a Support for Navigating First-Year 1. Orientation was useful as a support to first year students. 2. Orientation was useful for learning about non-academic support services (Housing, Counseling, Medical etc.) available.

3. Orientation was useful for learning about academic support and services (Library, lecturers, student tutors etc.) available. 4. Some Orientation activities were tailored to include and provide information to students' external support network (e.g., parents, spouse, etc.)
d. Orientation as a Strategy for Navigating First-Year. 1. The orientation program provided useful information regarding financing tuition fees. 2. The orientation program provided adequate resource materials for follow up with services, if needed. 3. The orientation program topics were useful to navigating the university's teaching and learning online applications (Moodle, zoom etc.). 4. Attending orientation helped manage expectations and anxieties about attending the university. 5. Attending orientation introduced strategies which proved useful to establishing or expanding control over stressful aspects of the transition.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Students were invited through the questionnaire survey phase to volunteer to be interviewed one on one. Based on responses, ten (10) survey respondents were purposefully sampled for interview. Specifically, interviewees who attended orientation were chosen as the sample population. These students were selected as the best group to facilitate expanded explanations of their survey responses, which in turn could enhance the study's findings with rich descriptive data and help the institution develop a more useful, supportive orientation program and strategy.

Protocol –Semi-structured Interview. The interview protocol was developed to elicit narrative from students on their perspectives of the usefulness of the new student orientation program. Students were asked to indicate their understanding of the purpose of the program, whether the program was found to be useful and why, whether the program helped them to develop strategies to ease their transition into university, and

whether they viewed the program as a support giving reasons. Following transcription, interviews were emailed to participants for their confirmation of accuracy.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was first collected and analyzed using SPSS v. 27. Descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, mode and standard deviation) were generated to analyze questions about respondents' demographics and other questions designed to elicit students' views about the program's usefulness.

To determine whether there were any significant differences in academic or social outcomes between the students who attended orientation and those who did not *t*-tests were employed to analyze students' self-report on of their grade point averages and the extra-curricular activities. This was followed by a second stage of data collection and analysis of qualitative data with the objective of providing deeper explanations of findings from the previous stage. Thematic analysis (TA) was employed to explore the data collected. It followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach for:

(1) Data familiarization – transcription, repeated reading and taking initial notes.

(2) Generation of initial codes – systematically coding interesting data features.

(3) Searching for themes – collapsing codes into themes. Gathering related data.

(4) Reviewing themes - ensuring themes and coded data are aligned.

(5) Defining and naming the themes – refining and generating clear themes.

(6) Producing the report – preparing a scholarly report of the analysis which relates back to research question (s) and features compelling data extracts.

Through the steps outlined above themes were actively developed or created through careful, reflective thinking about the data collected and linking it to the Schlossberg Transition theory and 4 S model framing the study and/or my own experiences as a practitioner with new students, orientation and beginning university studies (Braun & Clark, 2006).

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

As shown in Table 7, the survey collected limited demographic information from respondents and students who were interviewed.

Table 7

Demographics- Survey Sample (Ss) and Interview Sample

		Ss		Interviewees	
Age		Students	Valid %	Students	Valid%
	16-25	280	68	4	40
	26-35	91	22	4	40
	36-45	31	8	1	10
	46 and older	7	2	1	10
Total		409	100	10	100
Employment	Employed	-	-	6	60
	Full-time Student	-	-	4	40
Total				10	100
Gender	Male	77	19	2	20
	Female	320	78	8	80
	Combined others[a]	11	3	-	-
Missing		1			
Total		409	100	10	100
Parents' Highest Education Level	Primary	30	7	1	10
	Secondary	133	33	6	60
	Attended secondary but did not complete	59	14	0	0
	Technical/Vocational	42	10	0	0
	Other	30	7	1	10
	Undergraduate and/or Graduate degree	111	27	2	20
Total		409	100	10	100

Note. Dashes (-) represent elements not applicable and/or where data has not been obtained because the element was not included in the survey or the interview.
[a]. Categories *Non-binary*, and *Other* collapsed into 'Combined Others.'

A combined total of 419 students responded voluntarily responded to the survey and interviews. Most students (72%) across the two samples indicated the highest level of education obtained by their parents/guardians as post-secondary or lower meaning that the sample was primarily comprised of first-generation students. Similarly, 68% of the combined samples were young traditional college-aged students (16-25) and most (78%) were females.

Usefulness of the Orientation Program

Sixty-five percent (266 survey respondents) reported attending orientation. As shown in Table 8 most respondents (52% or 115 of 223 students who responded to the survey prompt) 'strongly agreed' (average Likert scale score was greater than 4.0) that orientation was useful as a support to them in their first year. Students also indicated on a Likert scale, where 1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree', that as a support, the orientation was useful for the provision of information on available academic (average responses Likert scale score was 4.21 or 'somewhat agree') resources and services. In contrast, most students (30% or 65 of 216 students who responded to the survey prompt) were ambivalent in their responses (average responses on Likert scale was 3.3, meaning 'neither agree nor disagree') when asked to indicate whether orientation served as a support for providing information and resources to their external support network (e.g., family).

Table 8

Students' Perspectives of the Usefulness of Orientation as a Support

Items	No. Students	Mean	Mode	*SD*[a]
Orientation was useful as a support to first year students.	223	4.32	5	0.87
Orientation was useful for learning about non-academic support services (Housing, Counseling, Medical etc.) available.	219	3.79	5	1.1
Orientation was useful for learning about academic support and services (Library, lecturers, student tutors etc.) available.	216	4.21	5	0.88
Some Orientation activities were tailored to include and provide information to students' external support network (e.g., parents, spouse, etc.).	216	3.3	3	1.22
The orientation program provided useful information regarding financing tuition fees	202	4.16	5	1.09
The orientation program provided adequate resource materials for follow up with services, if needed	198	4.02	5	1.02
Usefulness as strategy for navigating teaching and learning env.	193	4.1	5	1.04
Attending orientation helped manage expectations and anxieties about attending the university	190	3.62	4[b]	1.21
Attending orientation introduced strategies which proved useful to establishing or expanding control over stressful aspects of the transition	194	3.52	4	1.22

Note: Likert scale 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Somewhat agree, 5 = Strongly agree.[a] *SD* = Standard Deviation. [b]Multiple Modes exist. Smallest value is shown.

Students indicated, as shown in Table 9, that the orientation sessions and content covered were most useful. Overall, the average Likert scale scores rating showed that students' responses ranged from 'moderately useful' to 'very useful' (greater than 3, but less than 5) and the rating given most frequently ranged between 'very useful' to 'extremely useful'. Exceptions however included the sessions on the "Students' Tech

Toolkit" and the "Campus Tour" where responses were obtained from 48 and 42 students, respectively. Although 15 students indicated that the Students' Tech Toolkit session was "Extremely useful", results showed that the mean rating obtained about the usefulness of that session yielded an interpretation of "Moderately useful". The orientation session 'Introduction to Clubs/Extra curriculars' received a mean rating of 3.22 and the mode or Likert rating given most frequently on this item was 3.00, indicating 'Moderately useful' in both cases.

Table 9

Students' Perspectives of the Usefulness of Orientation Sessions Attended

Usefulness of Orientation sessions	No. Students	Mean	Mode	*SD*[a]
Introduction to learning platform (Moodle) & other on lining tools.	131	4.02	4.00[b]	.94
Money Matters	108	4.03	5.00	1.02
Library Introduction & Academic Writing.	131	3.85	4.00	1.10
Introduction to Clubs/Extra curriculars	95	3.22	3.00	1.18
Campus Tour	48	3.29	5.00	1.35
Students' Tech Toolkit	42	3.67	5.00	1.26
Registry & you	136	3.71	4.00	1.09

Note. Likert scale 1=Not at all useful, 2 = Slightly useful, 3 = Moderately useful, 4 = Very useful 5 = Extremely useful
[a] *SD* = Standard Deviation.
[b]Multiple Modes exist. Smallest value is shown.

Respondents generally rated the campus tour and the introduction to clubs/extracurricular activities lowest (Means = 3.29 and 3.22, respectively) when compared to the other orientation events. These two events were found to be only ‘moderately useful’ to students.

Confirming the findings of the survey, the students who were interviewed also described the orientation program as useful. Like the quantitative findings, 9 of 10 students referenced the ‘Library & Academic writing’, the ‘Money matters’ and the 'Introduction to online tools’ as the top three sessions/events which were useful, and they described those sessions as being most informative and helpful to their transition experiences. Three key themes developed from the analyses of interviews revealed why students assessed the orientation program to be a useful institutional support. Students explained that some sessions held during the week of orientation helped with their understanding of academic expectations, eased their academic transition and/or provided information which was useful to accessing resources and navigating administrative processes. These findings were thematically summarized as helping students to ‘create college going knowledge.’ Interviewee B, a male, first year, degree student majoring in Supply Chain Management, aged 16-25, articulated:

> When I started, my cousin was the only person who I knew, like personally, who attended [institution]. She was not that much helpful, right. So, with this, you know, with the [orientation] program, it was quite helpful. It was quite informative, I should say.

Interviewee I, a female, third year, degree student majoring in Biology, aged 16-25, also expressed “I would say it was useful because we were exposed to you know the different

resources…[told] what to expect so that you didn't just go into the university blindly so yeah I would say it was useful". Another student, Interviewee E, a female, first year degree student majoring in Management, aged 26-35 advised that for her the session which introduced the online learning system was most valuable,

> The part of it that [was] really help[ful] would be the same SRMS. When they talked about the online profile, how to register, what to press, how to get into which faculty how to select your courses and all of that. For me that was a really big part.

Finally, Interviewee H, a female third year Geography major, aged 16-25, "it was very informative for example the money matters and the different added programs like the library. All of those were very useful. It was not something you'd really consider as a Secondary [student]."

Other, students interviewed conveyed a mix of pre-existing emotions, namely of fear of the unknown, uncertainty about what to expect from university and personal concerns about finances which led to feelings of anxiety, even though attending university was their choice and therefore an anticipated and positive event in their lives. These findings were thematically categorized as 'Management of Expectations' where students clearly described their emotional states at the time of beginning studies, then related those to a direct impact of the program, which ranged from filling gaps in information, allaying fears to managing anxieties about what to expect from university. Interviewee H, previously introduced, described her situation,

> I was a bit worried about the money. I was a bit fearful about the money and the most well, the most impactful item that they had during the 6 days was the money

> matters. Mr. [name given] explained how you could pay in installments and that was such a relief to me.

Other students confirmed the program's function regarding management of expectations for example, Interviewee F, a male first year degree student majoring in Information Technology, aged 16-25, expressed, "well at first I wasn't sure what to expect from [institution] so the orientation actually allowed me to get a peek at what university life is like". Similarly, Interviewee I expressed, " You know I heard that [institution] could be hard", and Interviewee J, a female, second year, medical degree student, aged 26-35, described, "I was coming from a totally different degree program, and it was a new environment. The orientation basically allowed me to have a feel of what to expect."

Yet another theme, 'Convenience' was developed to capture students' assessments about the usefulness of the orientation program. This was evident across the survey and the interview data sets. For example, when asked in the survey to indicate the reason they did not attend orientation in their first year (143 students indicated that they did not attend orientation), 28% of the students selected "scheduling conflict with work or previous obligations" as the primary reason. It was also revealed from the interviews that students who were employed and attending university, preferred the online delivery format because it provided convenience and flexibility for them to join and to engage in the various sessions even whilst at work.

Specifically, Interviewee A, a female student majoring in Social Work degree, employed full-time and in the age bracket 46 and over and a student who experienced orientation on the campus (face-to-face) due to her previous enrollment in a Diploma undergraduate

program, expressed “It was a little bit more easier because in that way even though you’re at work, you could log in, you have your headset on and you could still pay attention”. Yet another second time undergraduate student, Interviewee E, previously introduced, articulated “It has been a lot different. I really do like the online platform. I do hope that it is something adopted by the University for persons, you know, who live far away.” Interviewee G, a female student majoring in General Agriculture from a hinterland area (Region 1) also found the online format convenient to her situation. However, she also explained that during the week of orientation, she chose to attend just 2 days because of internet limitations “I reside in the interior, and we don't get Wi-fi, so I have to use data. And it's…I mean, it's very expensive. And then zoom, use a lot of data. So that's the main reason”. . Convenience therefore was found to be an important theme associated with students’ orientation attendance, more so for those who were employed. Sub-themes developed under the main theme of ‘Convenience’ included “timing,” and “opportunities for orientation to the physical campus.” Interviewee B, previously introduced, recommended having evening options for the orientation. He explained that despite a desire to attend other sessions, the clash with work was a barrier.

> I was working right, so I was in and out, most of the time… I wanted to attend the last thing, I can't remember what that was, but I think I wanted to attend that one, but I honestly didn’t get a chance

Finally, related to convenience, two students highlighted the need for the orientation to provide campus tours, more so making use of technology given the COVID restrictions and their own past experiences .This finding corresponds with a) the low

response rate in the questionnaire regarding the usefulness of the campus tour. Interviewee G, recollected:

I wasn't aware that we had a faculty, orientation, and I missed that…it was kind of difficult, because I came from Region 2, so, I had to figure out all of these things find out where classes are…it took me approximately 2 months to really get all my classes to really find all the classrooms.

Likewise, interviewee J, who was also previously enrolled in another undergraduate program recalled:

> I didn't get to attend that orientation, so I was kinda put from high school into a new environment and it was harder to cope especially when you had to navigate around campus. I couldn't find buildings. I didn't get like that tour on orientation day.

Interviewee G offered her recommendation: "even on a virtual setting, maybe, if you can probably do like a video and just show buildings or take pictures or do a floor map", similarly, Interviewee J advised: "You need someone to, for example the Student body council, maybe make videos and then you can have more international students because it's [also] a form of advertisement for international students".

Impact of Orientation Attendance on Academic Performance and Social Integration

Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted using the survey data to determine if self-reported first year GPA, self-reported overall/cumulative GPA, and the self-reported number of extra-curriculars with which students engaged was statistically different between students who attended orientation and those who did not. Table 10 below illustrates the results which showed a statistically significant difference in self-reported first year GPA of students who attended orientation and the first year GPA of those who

did not attend orientation, (t308= 2.81, p < .05, *d* = -0.3). Hypothesis 1 was therefore accepted.

There was also a statistically significant difference in their self-reported number of extra-curriculars (social integration was measured in this study by the number of extra-curricular clubs they joined) with which students who attended orientation engaged (t273.21 = -2.28, p < .05, *d* = .24). Here again, the alternate hypothesis 3 was accepted. Cohen's *d* effect in both instances was small. Consequently, caution should be exercised in the interpretation of these findings to attribute the statistical differences solely to the intervention of the new students' orientation program. There may be other factors both within and external to the classroom which could explain the academic performance and student engagement rates of students in the study. Descriptive analysis of the survey data showed that most students (71.3%) self-reported that they did not opt to be engaged with student clubs/societies since their enrollment. Similarly, only four of the ten students who were interviewed reported joining clubs and/or becoming involved in extra-curricular activities. Finally, results showed that the average self-reported overall GPA of students who attended orientation was not significantly different from self-reported overall GPA of students who did not attend orientation, (t304 = -1.17, p > .05, *d* = .15). Hypothesis 2 was rejected and hypothesis 0, the null hypothesis was accepted in this case.

Table 10

t-test *Results Comparing Students on Self-Reported Academic Performance and Social Integration Outcomes*

	Attended Orientation		Did Not Attend Orientation					
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*df*	*t*	*p*	Cohen's *d*

First-Year Grade Point Average	3.11	.91	2.79	.99	308	-2.81	.005	-0.34
Overall Grade Point Average	3.10	.83	2.97	.95	304	-1.17	.242	-0.15
Extra-Curricular Clubs Engagement[a]	1.48	.79	1.30	.68	273.21	-2.28	.023	0.24

[a]Social Integration is measured in this study as the number of clubs/student societies students joined.

Students' general perceptions and attitudes regarding extra-curricular activities suggested that their understanding of the purpose of extracurriculars was that those activities were simply recreational, only sports-related and/or required time and in-person commitments which was not feasible.

DISCUSSION

Key findings of this study were a) that students consider the new students' orientation program useful in their transition to university, c) that the orientation program appears to have statistically significant effects on students' self-reported first year GPA and the number of student clubs with which they engage.

Congruent with the transition theory 'Self' factor, this study revealed important trends about the demographic characteristics, not least of which were findings regarding the first-generation status of over 70% of new students and majority representations in gender, geographic region of origin, age, marital and employment status of students. The majority female enrollments may be explained in part, by the gender gap between males and females completing secondary school in Guyana (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019).

Additionally, the age and regional geographic origins of students follows national population trends (Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The demographic findings may also be explained by overall trends in university and college enrollments in the Latin American and Caribbean region. Studies suggest that there has been a significant increase in university and college enrollment for all students but particularly for female students in South America and the Caribbean (Gazzola & Didriksson, 2008; Marginson et al., 2020). These expansion trends appear to be driven by various factors, including the expansion of access to higher education in developing countries, the growing demand for skilled workers in these countries, government policies, such as expanding access to financial aid opportunities for citizens to attend universities, the growth in online and distance higher

education, particularly since the global pandemic, and awareness of the importance of education, more so higher education which changing social norms (Marginson et al., 2020).

In Guyana, UNESCO's Institute of Statistics (2012) reported that the percentage of the total population who were tertiary educated was 11.62%. However, following ExxonMobil's 2015 discovery of vast reserves of oil offshore, the country began oil production in 2020, a development which has driven rapid economic growth ("Economy of Guyana," 2023). In turn, the government has since heavily invested the oil revenue in many sectors in particular education ("Education in Guyana," 2023). Consequently, there has been an explosion of tertiary scholarship opportunities for Guyanese, as well as national infrastructural investments to expand access to Secondary schools (the tertiary pipeline) across the country, especially rural areas (Department of Public Information, 2021, 2022, Guyana Times inc., 2022).

These actions directly target and remove historical barriers to accessing tertiary education, which in turn should impact significant growth in the citizens seeking higher education for the immediate and near future. In that context, it can be projected that the trend in first-time, first-generation enrollments will also continue. Jacobs (2010) advised that it is necessary for orientation practitioners to know all the students who are admitted to an institution to empirically support the case for these types of programs and to be responsive to the needs and challenges of varying students.

Demographics therefore especially important because they underlie students' preparation for tertiary education, predict adjustment, institutional fit and belonging as

well as personal attitudes which impact motivations and persistence toward program completion (Pratt et al., 2019). Individually the demographic trend findings of this study were informative about our students, however, given that students' background characteristics typically intersect producing multiple identity groups amongst students (Renn & Reason, 2021), for a more holistic picture about the institution's students, institutionally additional sociodemographic data should be collected. In this way, aspects of the orientation could be tailored to connect with students and introduce them to support resources and community groups.

Similarly, knowledge of students' first-year academic performance provides a useful starting point to guide decision making on first year interventions such as orientation or first-year seminars. Reason (2003) tells us that initial academic success, specifically in the first year of college, predicts retention and a grade point average of 2.0 or higher increases the probability that a student will be retained. The academic progression of students in this study revealed that whilst on average 21% of students (over 600 students given average annual enrollment of approximately 3000 students) fail in the first year of studies having obtained GPAs which fall below the minimum critical GPA of 2.0 there are high average first year retention rates (82%) despite students' first-generation status.

Once again, this is valuable insight regarding the progression of students. However, new questions arise, for example what is responsible for the first-year retention at the institution? Layering these findings with other sociodemographic characteristics of our students has the potential to provide more nuanced information on the similarities

and/or differences in characteristics, attitudes and/or motivations between the 79% who are successful in their first year and those who are not. Most importantly, such nuances in the information should serve to guide, where needed, individualized attention in the orientation programming for certain groups of students.

The purpose of the second research question was to determine whether the orientation program was useful to students in their transition to the university. Students' assessments of the program were positive, particularly in framing the orientation as a support that was helpful and informative. Students' descriptions of ignorance about processes, anxiety, fear of the unknown related to beginning university may be partially explained by their first-generation statuses (9 out of 10 students who were interviewed were first in their immediate families to attend university). Kuh (2005) defines first-generation as "those whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less" (p. 20). These students Choy (2001) advises that deficits in college-going knowledge and preparation are typical in first-generation students. Results therefore revealed that the orientation program offered new students comprehensive, practical and 'just-in-time' content/topics which supported their initial navigation of the tertiary environment, which in turn impacted their emotional well-being during their first-year transition. For example, students described negative perceptions about the institution and personal anxieties surrounding gaps in their own knowledge about the tertiary environment which were altered through their participation in the program. Students also indicated that orientation introduced campus support services such as guidance and counselling and provided information on opportunities for social engagement with peers.

The findings of this study therefore suggests that the institution's orientation program typically fulfills the general purpose of such programs by providing essential information and support for new students in their initial transition to the institution (Cueso, 1997; Jacobs, 2010; Mack, 2010; Walcott et al., 2020). Despite this general assessment of utility, results revealed important themes surrounding convenience which provide clear implications for practice.

Whilst the findings of the study revealed that students preferred attending orientation remotely, based on their personal circumstances, thematic narratives from students also highlighted limitations including the absence of flexible options to engage with the program (in terms of timing and delivery format given that at least one student articulated preference for a more traditional in-person experience), long sessions which led to boredom and the absence of opportunities to tour the physical campus, a problem particularly for students who were registered for hybrid courses. In a recent study of the switch to online freshman seminars at two US universities, which was occasioned by the global pandemic, researchers also found that virtual seminar programming lends flexibility for students to attend especially students who resided in distant parts of the state and that where synchronous online sessions were utilized, students experienced screen fatigue (Roybal et al., 2021).

Based on these findings I would recommend that the administrators consider retaining the virtual programming for orientation delivery with options for students to engage with content synchronously, asynchronously and in hybrid virtual/in-person ways. This will require modular course-styled delivery of the program content via the Moodle

learning platform. Moreover, per students' recommendations building in breaks and planning interactive activities during virtual sessions may encourage students to remain engaged. Options for virtual campus tours should be explored and the physical campus tours should resume.

Results regarding the positive effect of the orientation on students' self-reported first-year academic performance and engagement with extracurriculars suggest potential for the orientation program to contribute to the goal of students' academic success and social integration which in turn may impact their decisions to remain enrolled at the university. There have been several research studies on the effects of orientation program participation and students' success outcomes with mixed findings.

Considering the findings which showed no statistically significant effect on students self-reported overall GPAs, this may be explained by previous research studies which found that correlations with success outcomes were strongest when temporally more proximal to the orientation programs or first-year seminars such as in the first year of studies (Permzadian & Credé, 2016). Possible implications for practice to address these issues may be a more integrated and longer-term approach (e.g., second year orientation) to the orientation program whereby the program is paired with other student support interventions such as academic advising, tutoring, mentoring and co-curricular activities for a more holistic and impactful experience (Culver & Bowman, 2020; Kuh et al., 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016).

Stemming from this study yet another implication for practice should be further research to solicit the faculty and administrators' perspectives regarding the current

orientation program and a quasi-experimental study, over a long period of time, using actual data, to assess the effect the program on known success outcomes. Schlossberg's transition theory, the 4 S coping model only partially explained the findings of this study. 'Support' was the strongest factor clearly identified across all types of data which was collected and analyzed. This study confirmed that orientation was a critical institutional support for students at this university. Future iterations of this study could explore additional theories which address students' adjustment to college and other factors which impact students' success.

Through this study valuable insight has been provided on the character trends of the students and their academic performance which provides not only a baseline but also illustrates how available data may be utilized to drive action/interventions. However, these findings just scratch the surface of the wealth of information available to be extracted to build knowledge about all the students.

Limitations

Study Population

Improving the program of orientation to holistically impact students' success should be informed by the students themselves and other stakeholders involved in shaping the tertiary journey for students. Therefore, a key study limitation is the assessment of the usefulness has not captured the perspectives of others, for example academic stakeholders. Further, this study foregrounded the assessments of students who attended orientation, whilst that will be valuable, yet another limitation is the perspective of students who did not attend orientation to understand why and/or how we may mitigate barriers within our control.

Time

Data collection occurred over the course of one semester, specifically the first semester of the 2022/2023 school year. As such although there was a mix of respondents from first to final year, most respondents were in their first year and would not have had a complete assessment of their academic performance.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that undergraduate students viewed the new students' orientation program at a small university in South America as being a useful student support intervention during the transition period of their first year. Using multiple methods of inquiry, findings of this study showed that the orientation program was positively associated with better first-year grade point averages and students' engagement with clubs on campus, both known academic and social outcomes which predict overall students' success.

Caution is recommended in the interpretation of statistical findings given the study's use of self-reported data for statistical tests of significance. Additional research could examine the effect, if any, on academic and social outcomes matching same with actual data from orientation attendees and non-attendees. Furthermore, given limited parameters utilized in this study to represent academic performance outcomes (i.e., Grade Point Averages) and social integration (i.e., peer friendships and the number of clubs with which students engaged) caution should also be applied to the interpretations of findings.

Further research should explore the impact of the orientation program on a more comprehensive set of variables to reflect academic outcomes and social integration, not least of which should be the impact of the program on behavioral and affective outcomes. The sociodemographic findings of this study were informative because it is predictive of future enrollments, given the local Guyanese population context and offers insight about the incoming student which may be used to guide both general and targeted content in the future design of the orientation program.

The causal impact of university orientation programs and first-year seminars on students' success has been the focus of interest and academic study for many years. Although the body research studies reveal mixed findings about the positive effect, if any, of these types of programs on students' success outcomes, it is apparent that differences in institutional context plays a critical role in the impact and that these kinds of programs prove invaluable for different student populations, typically those who are most underprepared for university life (Culver & Bowman, 2020). This research study adds to the body of research examining the effectiveness of these types of student interventions albeit from the students' perspective.

Additional research could examine the usefulness of the current program from other key stakeholder perspectives, particularly teaching faculty, and other support services administrators. The 4 'Ss' for coping with transitions as posited in the Schlossberg transition theory was only partially validated in the present study. Support available to students was the most strongly demonstrated transition coping factor. Students viewed the orientation program as a critical institutional support in their first year even within this different institutional and demographic context.

Further research should be framed by additional and more contemporary theories to explain students' adjustment to and success in college. This study is the first of its kind at the university, to extract data and collate trends from available student data which relate to the background attributes of the students. Paired with the demographic findings from the questionnaire, the current research presents a picture of key personal factors, not least of which was the first-generation status of more than seventy percent of students.

Although these personal factors, described in the Schlossberg transition theory as attributes of the 'Self' for coping with transitions, the present study did not measure and therefore does not yield any findings on the interaction between those background characteristics and the orientation program to reveal any impact or usefulness to the promotion of students' success. Future studies should therefore focus on such measurements.

Finally, despite the overall positive effect of new students' orientation found in this study, orientation programs should not be viewed as a panacea for achieving students' success outcomes given that there will always be factors which vary contextually and interact to impact the outcome such as program type and program implementation (usually affecting duration, delivery format, content, target population etc.), student characteristics, institution type, and the design of the research study (Culver & Bowman, 2020; Mayhew et al., 2010; Permzadian & Credé, 2016; Lotkowski et al., 2004). Nevertheless, this study provides valuable insights into the usefulness of the UG orientation program and about the student population which will serve as a pivot for development of improvements to practice, particularly transition support interventions and further study.

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CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION & REFLECTIONS

Problem of Practice and Overview of Findings

Initially this study was designed to investigate the possible issues which were responsible for, or at least correlated with, poor student turnout and participation in the annual new student orientation exercises at the Turkeyen campus. In cycles 0 and 1 it was found that convenience was a key factor in the students' decisions to attend our program. Findings showed that securing time-off and/or the impracticality of long-distance travel to attend in-person events prior to the commencement of classes were real barriers which could explain low participation rates.

Consideration was given to designing interventions to mitigate this root cause however, during cycle 0 and cycle 1 due to the shift to fully online operations, the new student's orientation program was delivered for the first time, virtually using Zoom webinars. This change, driven by the global pandemic, was accompanied by a decision at the senior administrative level of the institution, to extend invitations to all applicants, irrespective of where they were in the admission process where previously, only applicants with admissions offers were invited. The significance of those changes was immediately apparent as, for the first time since I organized the new students' orientation week of events, there was a significant increase in the number of orientation attendees. Attendance numbers, based on event registration via the zoom webinar platform, increased on average by 59% when compared to event attendance and participation in the previous four years of hosting the induction events.

This dynamic attendance situation directly impacted the identified problem of practice resulting in concerns about the implications for the value of the research study if I continued to explore a problem that was rapidly changing. Therefore, reflections on the focus of the research led me to recast the problem of practice in more foundational light, specifically to shift from merely researching the reasons why students in first year were not attending orientation events to exploring students' perspectives about the usefulness of the current orientation program. Beyond that objective, I expanded my research to build on findings from the previous cycles to learn more about who our students were and their baseline rates of progression in our university. The study was also designed to measure the impact, if any, of the UG orientation program on students' academic achievement (GPAs) and social fit/integration with the institution (measured as engagement outside of classes by joining, being active in extra-curricular activities). In this new iteration, I wanted to carefully guide my interpretations of findings by theory and previous studies to offer a deeper understanding about our students more so how these findings could inform suitable and targeted changes in the orientation program to their benefit.

The findings offered important insight about the demographic composition of UG students, added to the body of literature about the impact of orientation, and suggested that the UG new student orientation has potential to positively impact factors which correlate with students' success in the local context. The study showed that students found the new students' orientation to be a useful institutional support in their transitions to university because it was informative about support resources and most especially

administrative processes. In this iteration, findings confirmed the impact of changes to the delivery format of the program but at the same time revealed that for a few students there were lingering challenges and factors which impacted their motivation to participate fully in the program for example, the time of the day when general orientation sessions were scheduled, and lengthy duration of each session which caused boredom. Findings also revealed that students found the orientation helped manage emotions of concern about finances, anxiety, and uncertainty about what to expect and what was expected of them in the university environment. Furthermore, findings regarding students' emotions can be explained, at least in part, by the key demographic finding that most students were the first in their families to attend university—first-generation students.

Consistent with the findings of previous studies (Gibbons et al., 2019; Pratt et al., 2019; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), this study found that amongst half of students interviewed, at least seven of whom reported a first-generation student status, there were concerns about funding education which ranged from securing scholarships to understanding the process to access student loans or partial-payment contracts. In contrast, notwithstanding employment status of most (6) students interviewed, forming connections with peers was not adversely affected and separation from home and family was not found to be an issue for UG students. The former can be partially explained by the fact that co-curricular activities are other ways for connecting both within and outside classes and the latter by the fact that most UG students are not required to live away from home and therefore retain the support and connection of family.

The findings of this study answered the research questions, and more is now known about our students, particularly how they view and value the new students' orientation program. However, new questions have arisen. For instance, now that there is a profile of students, I want to know even more about their background and the interactions of these variables with students' academic performance, satisfaction with UG and success indicators such as retention and persistence. Since, this study may be the first to comprehensively profile students, a key and inexpensive implication for practice would be routine (annual/semester) extrapolation of demographic reports and sociodemographic reports. Second, through formal semi-experimental study designs, this data should be matched with achievement, data institutionally collected regarding exposure to orientation and any other relevant area of interest to determine effect and interactions credibly and conclusively. Amendments to expand the types of sociodemographic data collected is a necessary and inexpensive perquisite to the foregoing. Finally, notwithstanding the value of further research, this study's findings about the first-generation status of such a considerable proportion of UG students, should be applied to extend the student success-type content of the current general orientation sessions and introduce new sessions. These sessions should be targeted to filling gaps in college preparation knowledge for students (esp. most underprepared groups) to develop their social and cultural skills to help the, make informed decisions about academic and extra-curricular matters (Culver & Bowman, 2020; Ishitani, 2016; Permzadian and Credé, 2016). To avoid the stigma effect of singling out any one group of students as 'at risk' or "in need of help" these sessions should continue to be targeted at all students (Culver &

Bowman, 2020; Gable, 2021). Differential effects, if any, for various groups may be the subject of future research.

Implications for practice to address deficiencies of the orientation program which were identified by students include providing flexible options for engagement with our program including a longer term self-paced asynchronous course, synchronous events repeated during orientation week which feature in-person event options to meet the traditional campus orientation week experience desired by students such as Interviewee 006. Finding dynamic ways to keep students attentive and engaged in sessions whilst online should be explored and implemented. Recordings and video tours should be standard. Given that the study found that peer connections were not made through extra-curricular engagement, an implication for practice, would be to scale up opportunities for co-curricular engagement projects in first-year course activities to develop students personal and social interactions skillsets.

Finally, theoretically, per my research objective articulated earlier in this chapter, this study represented investigation of my practice within the context of an established theory which addresses transition, and which has been applied to explain transition to higher education. The study therefore adds to the body of research where the Schlossberg transition theory has been applied in transitioning to university/college, international and diverse racial/ethnic contexts. However, following analysis of the data collected the 4 S coping factors were only partially validated. Support was the strongest demonstrated coping factor. In this study the positive effect of institutional support via the orientation was demonstrated. Per the theory, attributes related to the ‘self’ and the ‘situation’ of the

students' transition helped me to interpret findings about the demographic background of students and particularly why in their experiences, the orientation program was useful. Although, it was not anticipated, the overwhelmingly positive feedback about the switch to an online format for program delivery confirmed the importance of the 'situation' when considering transitions. Therefore, even in the UG and Guyana context, these factors for coping with transitions were found to be critical coping factors. Evans et al. (2010) recommends using this theory in conjunction with theories to understand and explain transitions. This can be addressed in future research.

This study has laid the foundation for future research about the UG student. Challenges and limitations highlighted through this first attempt to extrapolate data about our students should be used to inform enhancements to the technical logic of SRMS reports as well as what additional data points/items are required to accurately summarize the performance of students and by extension the health of the institution.

Final Thoughts

Embarking on this educational has been challenging and rewarding. I feel like I have conducted meaningful research into my local context using rigorous and theory-driven study design methods. Until this program, my concept of conducting research was abstracted from my daily practice. In my previous studies, research was compartmentalized as merely an academic pursuit. However, on this program, and through the use of action research, I have a renewed understanding that first research in my area of work can yield practical solutions within my sphere of influence to make changes and second that I am an expert in my context, therefore equipped with the

necessary research skills even as an administrator, I can investigate problems within my practice. These changes in my thinking and conception of research represent a shift from my previous (an unquestioning) understanding that research is the purview of academic staff in the education context. I have experienced significant growth in my ability to conduct independent research, think critically, and communicate my findings effectively. I have gained valuable experience in designing and conducting research studies, collecting, and analyzing data, and interpreting results. I will however admit that it is still a work in progress to master the skills to consistently write clear and concisely to present my work to both academic and non-academic audiences. Nevertheless, I am proud of the progress I have made as a researcher, and I am confident that I am well-prepared to continue to make significant contributions to my field.

Moreover, the saying that 'you don't know what you don't know,' has never been more applicable to my learning as it has been during this program. Beyond the figurative removal of limitations about who is qualified to conduct research, I am now equipped with language to articulate and describe the various paradigms of inquiry. However, getting to the finish line of the program and my research represents bringing an apprenticeship to a close. I like this analogy and the implication that achieving this EdD means two main things: 1. Closing off a period of learning and applying research skills to address issues which exist in my sphere of influence, and 2. Beginning a new stage of existence where there is continuous application of those skills set, which in turn serves to refine my skills which can be continuously applied to my improve my practice and add to the global body of educational research.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

I. Students' Background Profile
Please select the gender that you identify with from the options provided below Please select your age range from the options provided below What year of study are you currently enrolled? What is highest level of education completed by parents/guardian? How would you describe yourself? (Select the option that best applies) Please indicate your country of residence status If you selected, Local-Guyanese in the previous question, please indicate your geographic region of origin from the list below
II. Orientation Attendance & Experience
Did you attend a program of new student orientation in your first year of studies? ("Yes"/ "No") What type of session best describes the orientation program that you attended? ("Half- day (On campus)"/ "Multiple days (on campus)"/"Half-day (Online)"/"Multiple days (Online)" Which of the following levels of orientation programming did you attend? ("General"/ "Faculty") Which of the following General Orientation activities/information sessions did you attend? Select all options that applied to your orientation experience. 1. Introduction to Moodle 2. Money Matters 3. Introduction to the Library & Academic Writing 4. On campus/online Student Clubs Exposition 5. Campus tour activity 6. The Students' Tech toolkit & Cyber-security 7. Registry & You Sessions What prevented you from attending the orientation? 1. Did not know about the orientation. 2. Was awaiting admission to program of study. 3. Attending was not mandatory. 4. Scheduling conflict with work or previous obligations. 5. Other.
III. Transition Situation & Personal Experience
Reflecting on your first year, how did you view your transition to university? ("Positively"/" Negatively"/"Neutral") Based on your previous response, how would you describe the degree of stress, if any, the following factors may have had on your experience transitioning to university life? Likert scale used: 1= "Extremely Stressful", 2= "Stressful", 3= "Moderately Stressful", 4= "Minimal Stress", 5= "Not stressful at all". 1. Preparing to pursue tertiary education.

2. Role changes (e.g., secondary school student to university or mature working student returning to classroom as student 3. Other stressors (family-related) 4. Other stressors (work/peer -related)
IV. Academic Performance & Social Integration to University
Please indicate from the list below, the extracurricular activities that you have engaged with at UG? Select all options that apply. 1. Performing or visual arts 2. Athletic/Sports 3. Student government 4. Publications (student newspaper) 5. Academic/vocational/religious clubs or honor societies 6. All of the above How many extra-curricular clubs/teams are you currently enrolled? Reflecting on your first year, please select from the list below, the option that best represents the range of your Grade Point Average at the end of the first year of studies. Please select from the list below, the option that best represents the range of your current Overall/cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA)
V. Usefulness of Orientation Likert scale used 1=Not at all useful, 2 = Slightly useful, 3 = Moderately useful, 4 = Very useful 5 = Extremely useful
1. Introduction to Moodle 2. Money Matters 3. Introduction to the Library & Academic Writing 4. On campus/online Student Clubs Exposition 5. Campus tour activity 6. The Students' Tech toolkit & Cyber-security 7. Registry & You Sessions

APPENDIX A.1

ASU RECRUITMENT EMAIL - SURVEY

Dear Student,
You are receiving this message because you are eligible to participate in a research study exploring the utility of our new students' orientation program. Participation is voluntary.

My name is Daniella King. I'm a graduate student at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

I am conducting a research study under the direction of Dr Gustavo Fischman in the above-named College at Arizona State University. The purpose of this study is to determine the students' perspectives on the usefulness of the annual new student orientation at the University of Guyana (UG) Turkeyen campus, which is my current work context.

If you agree to participate in this survey kindly fill in this brief questionnaire (link provided below). The process should take no more than 20 minutes of your time. The survey is designed to gather your feedback *whether or not* you attended orientation in your first year of studies at UG since the information provided by students who were in attendance as well as those who were not will be useful in designing improvements to our orientation program and experience.
Your participation is voluntary, and any student identifiable data will not be used reporting on findings. There are no penalties/consequences for declining. All information collected will be treated as confidential. The information you share will be used only for the purpose of this research study. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation at any time. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: (Dr Gustavo Fischman, Principal Investigator - fischman@asu.edu and Daniella King, Co-Investigator – daking11@asu.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please click here or the link below if you wish to be part of the study:

APPENDIX A.2

RECRUITMENT EMAIL – INTERVIEWS

Text of Email Notification

You are receiving this message because you agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview after completing a brief survey for a study exploring the utility of our new students' orientation program. Please be reminded that your participation is voluntary, and you may opt out even at this point.

Allow me to reintroduce some key details on the objectives of this research. My name is Daniella King. I'm a graduate student at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

I am conducting a research study under the direction of Dr Gustavo Fischman in the above-named College at Arizona State University. The purpose of this study is to determine the students' perspectives on the usefulness of the annual new student orientation at the University of Guyana (UG) Turkeyen campus, which is my current work context.

If you agree to proceed with participate in this interview please select from the schedule the date time most suitable for you. Interviews will take no more than 30 minutes of your time. The format will be semi-structured, and questions are designed to gather your feedback *whether or not* you attended orientation in your first year of studies at UG.

As a reminder, all student identifiable data will not be used reporting on findings. There are no penalties/consequences for declining to participate. All information collected will be treated as confidential. The information you share will be used only for the purpose of this research study. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation at any time. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: (Dr Gustavo Fischman, Principal Investigator - fischman@asu.edu and Daniella King, Co-Investigator – daking11@asu.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX A.3

SHORT CONSENT SURVEY

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Gustavo Fischman in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to explore student perspective on the usefulness of the new student orientation annually at the University of Guyana (UG) Turkeyen campus. I am surveying current students for their feedback on their orientation and first year experience.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve a short survey taking no more than 20 minutes of your time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty, You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation at any time.

Although there is no benefit to you, a possible benefit of your participation is insight that would lead to our improvements of the overall orientation program and better anticipation of first year students' needs. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your responses will be anonymous and in reporting of said responses any personal information/data collected will be de-identified. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used. Your student data will only be released in aggregated form such as averages, tables, and graphs. De-identified data collected as a part of current study will not be shared with other investigators for future research purposes.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: (Professor Gustavo Fischman Principal Investigator - gustavofischman@asu.edu and Daniella King, Co-Investigator – daking11@asu.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX A.4

DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Demographic Comparison Survey Sample (Ss) and Turkeyen Campus Population (TCP)

		Ss		TCP[a]	
		Students	Valid %	Students	Valid %
Age	16-25	280	68	8650	71%
	26-35	91	22	2584	21%
	36-45	31	8	852	7%
	46 and older	7	2	175	1%
Total		409	100	12261	100
Mode		1[b]		1[c]	
Citizenship	Foreign	3	1	75	1
	Local-Guyanese	406	99	12186	99
Total		409	100	12261	100
Mode		2[d]		2[e]	
Employment	Employed	-	-	5066	42
	Full-time Student	-	-	7195	58
Total				12261	100
Mode				2[f]	
Ethnicity	Amerindian	16	4	-	-
	Black or Afro-Guyanese	157	38	-	-
	Chinese	1	0	-	-
	East Indian or Indo-Guyanese	78	19	-	-
	I prefer not to respond	1	0	-	-
	Mixed Race	156	38	-	-
Total		409	100	-	-
Mode		2[g]			
Gender	Male	77	19	4653	38
	Female	320	78	7608	62
	Non-binary	1	0		
	Other[h]	10	2		
	Total	408	100	12261	100
	Missing	1			
Total		409		12261	
Mode		2[i]		2[j]	
Geographic Region	Region 1 – Barima/Waini	12	3	146	1

	Region 10 – Upper Demerara-Berbice	26	6	881	7
	Region 2 – Pomeroon-Supenaam	19	5	410	3
	Region 3 – Essequibo Islands-West Demerara	74	18	1759	14
	Region 4 – Demerara/Mahaica	232	57	7746	64
	Region 5 – Mahaica-Berbice	16	4	515	4
	Region 6 – East Berbice/Corentyne	14	3	390	3
	Region 7 – Cuyuni/Mazaruni	9	2	177	1
	Region 8 – Potaro-Siparuni	1	0	37	0
	Region 9 – Upper Takutu-Upper Essequibo	2	0	120	1
	Total	405	100	12181	100
	Missing	4			
Total		409		12181[l]	
Mode		6[k]		5[m]	
Parents' Highest Education Level	Attended secondary but did not complete	59	14	-	-
	Attended university but did not complete	4	1	-	-
	Graduate university degree	60	15	-	-
	Other	30	7	-	-
	Primary	30	7	-	-
	Secondary	133	33	-	-
	Technical/Vocational	42	10	-	-
	Undergraduate university degree	51	12	-	-
Total		409	100	-	-
Mode		6[o]			
Study Year	Fifth	2	0	-	-

	First	178	44	12261	100
	Fourth	64	16	-	-
	Second	99	24	-	-
	Third	64	16	-	-
	Total	407	100	-	-
	Missing	2			
Total		409			
Mode		3[p]			

Note. Dashes (-) represent elements not applicable and/or where data has not been obtained, either because the data is not routinely collected by the University of Guyana, or the element was not included in the survey.

[a]Admitted Applicants Demographic Report 2017 – 2021. [b]1 = 16-25. [c]1 =16-25. [d]2 = Local Guyanese.[f]2=Full time student. [g]2=Black/Afro-Guyanese. [h]Categories *Prefer not to say*, and *Other* collapsed into 'Other.' [i]2=Female. [j]2= Female. [k]6=Region 4 - Demerara/Mahaica. [l]Category 'Not applicable' excluded from total population count since it applies to foreign students. [m]5= Region 4 - Demerara/Mahaica. [n]3=Single [o]6=Secondary. [p]3=First.

APPENDIX A 5

IRB EXEMPTION LETTER

ASU Knowledge Enterprise Development

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Gustavo Fischman
MLFTC: Educational Leadership and Innovation, Division of
480/965-5225
fischman@asu.edu

Dear Gustavo Fischman:

On 10/31/2022 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Exploring the Usefulness of Orientation program at the University of Guyana using the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory
Investigator:	Gustavo Fischman
IRB ID:	STUDY00016255
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Consent_Form_Interview15-08-2022.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Consent_form_Survey 15-08-2022.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Daniella King IRB Social Behavioral Protocol.docx, Category: IRB Protocol; • Interview_Protocol 28_10_2022.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Recruitment_methods_email_Interviews15-08-2022.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Recruitment_methods_email_Survey15-08-2022.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Research Permission and Agreement Letter, Category: Off-site authorizations (school permission, other IRB approvals, Tribal permission etc); • Survey_Protocol 28-10-2022.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions

	/interview guides/focus group questions); • UG Permission Letter to Conduct Research, Category: Off-site authorizations (school permission, other IRB approvals, Tribal permission etc);

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk), (4) Secondary research on data or specimens (no consent required) on 10/31/2022.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at research.integrity@asu.edu to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Daniella King
Daniella King

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction & Consent
Knowledge about New Students' Orientation
How did the UG New Students' orientation factor into your transition experience? Did you attend any planned activities? Why/why not? What did you understand to be the purpose of this program? a. Which orientation activity did you find most useful? Please expand. b. Describe the usefulness of the orientation to you? c. Did it connect you with important forms of student support (people or services) available within the UG community? d. Do you have any tangible artefacts (e.g., program, student handbook) from your participation in the orientation
Self & Situation
What is your current year of study and major? a. Was this your intended major? b. Is it the same as at the time of enrollment? c. If you changed majors since enrollment, can you describe what influenced that decision? d. What influenced your choice in the University of Guyana as opposed to any other tertiary institution? e. Did you feel at the time that you were in control of your choice? How did you prepare for starting university? f. In retrospect, was the timing right for you? Why/Why not? g. How would you describe your transition experience? h. Where did get advice on your plan to start university? How would you describe yourself and your approach to changing life situations? i. Is your outlook usually positive or negative?
Adjustment to Tertiary Environment
Are there any extra-curricular activities that you engage in at UG? a. Did you learn about the range of extra-curricular activities because of orientation? If not, how did you come to know?
Support
What role did your family/friends play in your transition experience? Are you as connected with friends or other relationships which existed prior to university? Have you made new friends?
Strategies
What strategies did you use to navigate your first year at UG? a. Did you learn those strategies at orientation? b. Did you find those strategies helpful to your transition experience? c. What would you have done differently? Looking back, how useful would you say orientation was as a strategy in your transition experience? d. Based on your response, would you change/add any element? Please elaborate. Would you encourage other new students to attend orientation? please tell me more on your position.
Thanks, and Dismissal

APPENDIX B.2

SHORT CONSENT INTERVIEWS

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Gustavo Fischman in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to explore student perspective on the usefulness of the new student orientation annually at the University of Guyana (UG) Turkeyen campus. I am interviewing current students for their feedback on their orientation and first year experience.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve a short interview of 30 minutes of your time to gather your feedback whether or not you attended the orientation program. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty, You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation at any time. Although there is no direct benefit to you, a possible benefit of your participation is insight that would lead to our improvements of the overall orientation program and better anticipation of first year students' needs as they transition to university. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your responses will be anonymous and in reporting of said responses your personal information/data will be de-identified. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used. De-identified data collected as a part of current study will not be shared with other investigators for future research purposes.

I would like to audio record for this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be recorded; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know. You may join the interview with your camera/video off, otherwise before the start of the interview I will ask you to turn off your video.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: (Professor Gustavo Fischman Principal Investigator - gustavofischman@asu.edu and Daniella King, Co-Investigator – daking11@asu.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study.

By signing below, you are agreeing to be part of the study.

Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date:

APPENDIX C

UNIVERSITY OF GUYANA FIRST-YEAR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

First Year Academic Performance: Four-year overview

Academic Year	No. Students[a]	Grade Point Average Mean (%)			
		< 2.0	2.0 – 2.6	2.7 – 3.3	3.4 – 4.0
2017/2018	2601	25	23	39	24
2018/2019	2951	27	28	35	18
2019/2020	3020	19	36	26	11
2020/2021	3042	14	34	29	12
Total	11614	21	30	32	17

Note. Data represents Turkeyen campus undergraduate students only.

[a]Includes students who may have withdrawn after the first year of studies.

APPENDIX D

UNIVERSITY OF GUYANA FIRST-YEAR RETENTION

First-to-Second-year Retention Rates by Academic Year: Four-year Campus overview

Academic Year	Undergraduate Degree Programs Retention Rate			Undergraduate Associate Degree Diploma/Certificate Programs Retention Rate			All Programs Retention Rate		
	Students Enrolled	Students Withdrawn*	$\bar{X}$ (%)	Students Enrolled	Students Withdrawn*	$\bar{X}$ (%)	Students Enrolled	Students Withdrawn*	$\bar{X}$ (%)
2017/2018	1624	260	84	1087	222	80	2711	482	82
2018/2019	1998	295	85	1119	249	78	3117	544	83
2019/2020	2116	298	86	1109	195	82	3225	493	85
2020/2021	2164	401	81	1044	234	78	3208	635	80
Total	7902	1254	84	4359	3549	79	12261	4803	82

Note. Data represents Turkeyen campus undergraduate students only. Rate of Retention calculated as the total number of enrolled students (including any who have withdrawn or cancelled), minus the number of students who have withdrawn or cancelled their enrollment, divided by the total number of enrolled students.

*Comprises sum of complete withdrawals of an annual cohort in the academic year of enrollment and the following year.

APPENDIX D.1

STUDENTS RECORDS MGT. SYSTEM REPORTS UTILIZED

Name of Report	Purpose	Period Accessed
Admitted Applicants' Demographics Reports	Demographic Profile of Students.	2017/2018-2020/2021
	First-year Rate of Retention	
Broadsheet Reports	First-year Grade Point Averages	2017/2018-2020/2021
Complete Withdrawal Reports	First-year Rate of Retention	2017/2018-2020/2021

APPENDIX E

PREVIOUS CYCLES OF LEARNING

Applying the AR cyclical research process, I completed two previous cycles of research, cycles 0 and 1 conducted in Spring and Summer 2021, respectively. I planned and collected data to investigate the possible issues which were responsible for, or at least correlated with, a problem of practice, which I identified at that time to be *poor student turnout and participation in the annual new student orientation exercises at the Turkeyen campus*. Each cycle completed resulted in useful findings regarding the central topic of students' assessment of new student orientation. A summary is stated below:

Cycle 0 Process, Findings and Learning

For Cycle 0, I did a small qualitative study. Using semi-structured interviews (n = 2) data was collected from students enrolled at the UG, Turkeyen campus. One student attended orientation in the first year of studies and one student did not. Main themes which emerged in the findings were:

- The students preferred certain pull factors to influence orientation attendance, such as a mandatory requirement, dedicated focus on navigating the application and registration features of the SRMS and opportunities for more one-on-one yet informal engagement with their faculty and for socializing with peers during the orientation week.
- Attending a multi-day program of orientation at the campus was inconvenient for students employed full time, or costly and impractical for students who may reside long distances from the campus.

- General satisfaction with the topics covered but a preference for an option to *self-direct* their orientation learning, provided that adequate, relevant, and easily accessible information is made available e.g., via the UG website.
- Attending or not attending orientation had perceived no impact on the students' social integration later. These were reported to have occurred naturally in the classroom.

Although this cycle provided me with rich data to better understand the students' perspective connected to the problem of practice identified, the sample size, was a limitation to inform the design of an intervention.

Cycle 1 Process, Findings and Learning

For Cycle 1, I utilized mixed methods action research (MMAR) to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. A small sample (n=10) of students responded to a survey instrument and semi-structured interviews (n=3). Quantitative findings showed that attendance at orientation was evenly split between respondents. Students reported a preference for orientations done at the level of the faculty. Eighty percent (80%) of the respondents found experience to be moderate to very useful. Qualitative findings revealed themes such as convenience, motivations and desire, expectation of faculty-specific orientation.

Irrespective of attendance status, students' responses consistently conveyed strong agreement with the statements which outlined aspects of orientation that should be normative or were experienced by the respondents. Moreover, there were similarities

across both strands of data collected regarding students' expectations that orientation should be the mechanism through which students are informed about their faculties, programs, and course requirements. The recommendation that orientation be made mandatory was made in the survey as well as by an interview participant. This suggests students' expectation of value and utility from the orientation program.

Based on these findings, I tentatively concluded that students had positive experiences with the university orientation program, even though there was clear preference for information about their faculties and related program or course matters. Three reasons were found to reoccur across in the responses from both qualitative and quantitative as the factors or challenges impacting students' decisions to attend or not attend orientation:

- Schedule conflicts with the orientation program.
- Pending administrative processes.
- The perception and/or knowledge that attending the event was not mandatory. Other peripheral challenges reported included distance and cost of travel to the campus, which students viewed as expensive and/or impractical especially for those coming from distant geographic regions if classes had not officially begun. Students also cited lack of information about the event as a reason for not attending orientation.

Finally, findings from this cycle revealed that most students who attended orientation strongly agreed that the orientation was helpful or advantageous in their

transition experience. However, the three students who were interviewed reported no significant disadvantages to missing orientation because there were other ways, such as asking friends, of gathering the information that was needed. This latter finding was also consistent with findings from cycle 0.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ms. Daniella King is a Senior Assistant Registrar in (Students' Welfare) at the University of Guyana. She has over 17 years of experience in the university, having served in various administrative roles in the offices of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the Faculty of Natural Sciences, and the University Library. Ms. King holds a Diploma in Tourism Studies, a Bachelor of Arts, and a Master of Business Administration from the University of Guyana. Her academic interests include women's issues, specifically ensuring diversity and equity in the workplace and society. She is also involved in quality assurance in education, currently serving as an executive member of the Guyana Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education Core Group (GYCCG), a sub-group of the Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education. In this role, she contributes to the development of quality management systems in the local and regional tertiary landscape.