Kate Flower (First Year Experience Librarian) and I reviewed the literature on the contribution of student orientation to student success.

Here are general impressions:

1) There are a lot of studies linking orientation to student success that are focused on 1 institution. It was very difficult to find a comprehensive literature review or meta-analysis that drew conclusions from the plethora of studies.

2) Cross-institutional studies tended to be surveys of what institutions are doing, rather than an evaluation of effectiveness.

3) There is some overlap in the terminology. When studies look at “orientation,” they are sometimes looking at a pre-semester short seminar, and sometimes they are looking at a semester- or year-long freshman seminar. In the literature, the term “orientation” is applied to either one almost interchangeably.

4) There were more studies pre-2000 on orientation as a short introduction to college. After 2000, most studies have focused on semester- or year-long freshman seminars. It doesn’t seem that questions about the efficacy of orientation as a short introduction to college is still a hot-button issue for most institutions. The studies, even on freshman seminars, go back to the 1970’s.

We found 2 particularly helpful studies:


Although this report focuses on community colleges, it could be relevant to LCSC because they note the high enrollments of at-risk students and high attrition rates at community colleges. This report amounts to a literature review of the information on semester-long freshman orientations up until the date of publication (1997).

A few nuggets:

The confluence of all these findings suggests that community colleges may be able to decrease student attrition and increase graduation rates significantly by means of effective retention-promoting institutional practices or programs. One institutional practice with already-documented potential for stemming the tide of student attrition at community colleges is the freshman orientation seminar (Barefoot, 1993a). Its retention-promoting potential for community colleges is highlighted by the following recommendation made in a national report issued by the American Association of
We urge that community colleges give more attention to student retention. Every college should develop a comprehensive First Year Program with orientation for all full-time, part-time, and evening students. (Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 1988, p. 11) (Cuseo, 1997, pp. 4-5).

One strategy for extending the length of the seminar retroactively is to link it with a pre-semester freshman orientation program. One two-year institution, Marymount College (CA), requires student attendance at its pre-semester orientation program as part of its required first-semester freshman seminar (Cuseo, 1997, p. 17).

This article reports on a large survey of 6700 students and 5000 faculty members at 30 colleges and universities nationwide. The survey asked the participants to describe their institutions' approach to the first year of college. They also asked the students to rate on a scale of 1-4, the extent to which your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in various areas. (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006, p. 161). They then looked for correlations between the activities of the colleges' first-year activities and larger perceived changes in academic competence.

...the vast majority of the explained variance in academic competence is attributable to what happened to students during their first year and not to the characteristics they brought with them to college. With the covariates taken into account, both the student experience and faculty environment variable sets produced statistically significant and unique contributions to explaining variance in academic competence.

Higher reports from faculty members that their institutions provided a coherent first year experience for students and positive influence on students' academic competence, Faculty members on those campuses reported that their institutions view the first year as a distinct period in which later years build, academic and student affairs units work together in delivering the first year, and that programs and services have stated goals that are actively pursued. In addition, students reported higher levels of academic competence if they were enrolled at an institution whose faculty and student affairs involvement in conferring focused on teaching and learning or the first-year experience. (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006, p. 166).