Great Expectations:
A Review of Jackson State Community College’s New Student Orientation and How it
Affects Academic Success of Under-Represented Minority Students

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Great Expectations: A Review of Jackson State Community College’s New Student
Orientation and How it Affects Academic Success of Under-represented Minority Students

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Summary: In response to the Complete College Act of Tennessee, Jackson State Community College recognized the need to take a more active approach to new student advising. This study will describe the Great Expectations Orientation and Registration program (new student orientation) in detail and review academic findings, by cohort group, using a control group and a test group. Specifically, this study will review the academic success of degree seeking, under-represented minority, first time freshman students attending Jackson State Community College between fall 2010 and fall 2012.

Abstract: The Great Expectations Orientation and Registration program was developed to assist new students (degree seeking, first time freshman and transfer students) with resource information and academic advising prior to entering their first semester at Jackson State Community College (JSCC). This program was developed after years of having very few requirements for new and returning students regarding academic and/or career counseling. Likewise, there was no information given to students regarding resources and expectations, thus the name of the program. Prior to fall 2012, an orientation or advising requirement was viewed as a roadblock by the institution. The intent was to allow students the flexibility and freedom, through technology, to select their classes based on their program of choice. While this process may have boosted initial enrollment figures, the persistence and graduation rates for this group of students were trending downward.
Each group of students that participated in a Great Expectations Orientation and Registration (GE) session was coded with an attribute code that is directly tied to the semester of their participation. For this study, we will review fall 2010 students (no orientation available), fall 2011 students (an orientation was available but not required) and fall 2012 students (mandatory orientation). For the purpose of this study, students in fall 2010 are the control group. GE participants in fall 2011 are GE 201180 (test). GE participants in fall 2012 are GE201280 (test).

Initial research shows that grade point averages were positively affected with the implementation of mandatory GE (GE201280) - as compared to students not required to attend GE sessions. This study will disaggregate attendees and track academic success as presented by first semester grade point average of first time freshmen specifically, underrepresented minority students.
Jackson State Community College Fast Facts

Jackson State Community College, founded in 1969, is governed by the Tennessee Board of Regents. It is located in the heart of West Tennessee. Its main campus is in Jackson, TN (Madison County) with three satellite campuses strategically located in Humboldt, TN (Gibson County), Lexington, TN (Henderson County) and Savannah, TN (Hardin County). Jackson State serves 14 surrounding counties in predominately rural settings, the largest service area in the Tennessee Board of Regents system.

Reflecting on enrollment over the past three years shows a significant decrease over time (Figure 3). In the fall 2010, JSCC boasted a headcount of 5,361. Then, in fall 2011, enrollment fell to 4,928 headcount. Last year, fall 2012, the headcount was 4,494-down almost 1,000 students. Historically, JSCC was the only public higher education institution in Jackson however, the opening of the University of Memphis satellite campus in Jackson in fall 2011 may have attributed to the decline in Jackson State enrollment. Likewise, the improvement in the local economy in 2011 added jobs to the region which may also have impacted enrollment inasmuch as between 2008-2010 many students took advantage of federally funded education/skill enhancement programs designed to assist those that were affected by closures and layoffs.

The campus student demographic is 74% white and 65% women with an average age of 25 (Figure 1). JSCC boasts a modest cost with tuition, fees, and books for a fulltime student at $4,708. The average composite ACT score is 18.3 (Figure 2).
Need for the Program

Having boasted a historical trend of steady enrollment, the past three years were reflective of a struggling national economy. As the economy flailed, the enrollment numbers increased. Jackson (Madison County) is the seat of an industrial hub for western Tennessee. Many manufacturers and logistical hubs are located within 10 miles of the campus. As these businesses began drastic layoffs and cutbacks, admission applications and enrollment increased. Enrollment management was not a critical matter of conversation. On the contrary, it was quite easy for students to be admitted to the college and enrolled in the classes of their choice. The intent was to allow students the flexibility and freedom, through technology, to select their classes based on their academic program. Students had no ‘guardrails’ to assist them along their academic journey. Times were good; enrollment was up and revenue was flowing. Then, the unthinkable occurred. Enrollment began to decline. What were the factors influencing the enrollment decline? There are many assumptions: the arrival of the University of Memphis-Lambuth campus to the city of Jackson, the end of the industrial recession with more jobs becoming available in manufacturing as well as other sectors (people may choose work over school), poor marketing and public relations—the Jackson State message may not have been reaching the targeted market. Possibly all or none of the aforementioned factors could be identified as contributing to the loss of enrollment. By 2012, revenue, which is directly impacted by enrollment, was down and a strategic plan was developed.

The Complete College Act of Tennessee was passed into law in 2010 and as a system, the Tennessee Board of Regents challenged each campus to comply with minimal standards as a part of the completion agenda. The funding formula changed and performance (student success,
retention and completion) was more heavily weighted in the evaluation of each institution as opposed to enrollment.

For several years, in an attempt to ‘remove barriers to enrollment’, the institution took a more passive approach to its advising and registration processes. Students were allowed to register on their own without an orientation, advising or any bridge to college. The institution delivered little interaction to new students and much of what a student learned about academic planning during their first semester at Jackson State was learned by happenstance or through peer advising. The institution recognized the need to improve efforts to recruit new students, retain them by providing additional academic resources and student engagement and ultimately, graduate them with the certificate or degree of their choice. As a part of this self-review, Jackson State Community College recognized the need to take a more active approach to new student advising as this was a completion component outlined by the Complete College Act of Tennessee.

The Great Expectations Orientation and Registration program was developed to assist new students (degree seeking, first time freshman and transfer students) with resource information and academic advising prior to entering their first semester at Jackson State Community College. This program was developed after years of allowing new and returning students very little requirements for academic and/or career counseling. Likewise, there was no information given to students regarding resources and expectations, thus the name. “A growing body of research has identified approximately a dozen policies and practices that can improve graduation and retention rates. But while a growing number of colleges are offering things such as student success courses, learning communities and experiential learning, only a small number of colleges require such student experiences and far too few students participate in them”
(Bradley, 2013). The need to implement mandatory orientation sessions was recognized by the institution –resulting in requiring all degree seeking first time freshmen and first time transfer to attend prior to enrolling in classes.
Logistical Planning

Planning a mandatory orientation required commitment across the entire campus; faculty, staff and administration. At the outset of the process, a small committee of staff from the Admissions Office and the Registration Center along with the Vice-President of Student Services planned for the strategic implementation of a mandatory program that spanned four campuses. There would need to be hundreds of man-hours volunteered to accomplish the goal of taking every degree seeking first time freshmen and first time transfer student through an orientation program. One of the first valuations was to anticipate student participation. This was done by taking a mean of three years of enrollment of first time freshmen and first time transfer students (average from 2009-2011 - 1,100 new first time freshman and first time transfer students). Therefore, orientation was planned for 1,100 students.

Secondly, the committee reviewed facilities utilization and in an effort to maintain high touch and high technology, an instructional room in the library was selected. This would allow each student to have access to their own computer to support the registration portion of the orientation program and likewise, the student would be exposed to the academic resources available in the library, another intentional effort toward student success. Jackson State is a commuter’s college and with that in mind, convenient session times were a must. The program was designed to be replicated at all four locations and was to remain within a two and a half hour timeframe; one hour of orientation and up to an hour and a half of advising and registration. The sessions were offered mornings, afternoons and evenings and students could choose their orientation site as a matter of their convenience.

The next items addressed were communication and staffing. An online registration process was established and the college admissions letter included detailed explanation of the
orientation registration process. In a phenomenal effort from the Admissions team, personal calls were placed to all accepted students, often before their acceptance letter had reached them, inviting and registering students into an orientation session. Other staff volunteers made personal reminder calls to each student the day before their scheduled orientation-reinforcing the location and time. Faculty and staff volunteers were trained and available to facilitate the orientation and to provide general advising during each registration portion of the program.
Design and Implementation

The committee developed a one-stop-shop approach to the Great Expectations Orientation and Registration program. By attending one session, the student received an orientation to Jackson State with expectations discussed, advising pertinent to their program of study, and registration for their first semester classes: each student leaving the session with a detailed schedule, ready to begin classes. Another important factor in the design of this program is that is replicable. This program can be modeled and implemented at other institutions and more significantly, can be replicated semester after semester.

Part one of the Great Expectations program consists of the orientation. A ‘New Student Guide’ was developed and used as a tool during the orientation portion. It was designed to include essential information about academic resources, Student Services offices, important phone numbers and expectations for success. Likewise, a check-list was included and discussed at each session to give students a guide beyond the actual orientation session. Each session included a ‘question and answer’ period that was uniquely programmed to have students ask questions which then dictated that portion of the program. This approach to sharing vital information worked well because it allowed students to make connections (used this as an exercise, dividing the room for small group discussions) while the facilitator made the best use of time in answering the questions of the group, not lecturing. In addition, there were success materials essential to the program that were to be discussed at each session.

Part two of the Great Expectations program, consists of the Registration portion. Students are taught how to navigate the student portal to create a log in. They are given a registration overview which consists of navigating the JSCC Catalog and Student Handbook. Each student is then assisted with selecting classes based on their selected program of study. In
this portion of the program we ask each student to participate in an ‘Online Readiness Survey’ created by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness in response to a Student Learning Initiative indicating poor success rates for new first time students taking online courses (Figure 4).
Assessment and Outcomes

At the onset of the implementation of Great Expectations, there were five areas that were identified to be assessed: attendance, student feedback/session evaluations, attenders on the ‘purge’ list, academic success during the first semester as determined by grade point average and retention to the second semester.

The attendance outcomes were phenomenal. The goal was to accommodate 1,110 students over an eleven week period at all campus locations. The goal was surpassed as 1,255 students experienced a Great Expectations Orientation and Registration session with about 85% of them actually enrolling for the semester. Each student that attended orientation but did not enrolled was surveyed with the majority stating financial reasons for not attending; however, those students did indicate a plan to enroll the following semester. Armed with those names, the recruiters and financial aid counselors were able to reach out to those students, offering assistance. This level of customer service had not been experienced on campus and indeed took the efforts of all to ensure this measure of success.

Critical to the assessment of the mandatory orientation was the need to receive student feedback from each session. Those evaluations became a critical component in the evaluation process, particularly for the implementation cohort. On a 5-point scale, students were asked to evaluate the registration process and their overall satisfaction with the orientation experience. The mean score of 4.63 was encouraging and a testament to the dedication and professionalism of the faculty and staff that assisted.

Historically, 19-22% of the headcount is ‘purged’ each fall semester due to non-payment of tuition. However, fall 2012, only 17% of the enrollment (742) was purged. Moreover, less than 3% (20) of the students that attended Great Expectations were purged from their classes.
Each orientation participant was reminded throughout the program of the need to meet financial
deadlines and the deadline was reiterated as well. More importantly, 72% of all Great
Expectations attendees were retained from fall 2012 to spring 2013 as compared to all new
students (68%).
Academic Impact

For the purpose of this study, the academic success of the under-represented minority student population at JSCC was assessed. As defined by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness Diversity Strategic Plan 2011-2015, JSCC’s under-represented minority student population consists of adult learner’s age 25 or greater, Hispanics, males, low income students (Pell grant recipient) and Veteran students. For brevity, this presentation includes adults, Hispanics and low income students.

Overall, degree seeking first time freshmen that attended the mandatory orientation touted an overall grade point average of 2.18, compared to the non-attenders grade point average of 1.91. This is the benchmark for the review of the grade point averages for the remainder of the study.

- Of the adults age 25 and older GE attenders, the grade point averaged 2.43, which fared better than the average for all degree seeking first time freshmen attenders (2.18 GPA)
- Of the Hispanic student GE attenders, the grade point averaged 2.43, which fared better than the average for all degree seeking first time freshmen attenders (2.18 GPA)
- Of the low income student (Pell grant awarded) GE attenders, the grade point averaged 2.19, which fared better than the average for all degree seeking first time freshmen attenders (2.18 GPA)

What is obvious is the gap between the adult and Hispanic groups when compared to the low income (Pell grant awarded). This finding has sparked additional study within the cohort group GE201280 to further disaggregate the data.
Conclusion and Recommendation

While it is clear that the institution should develop a strategic plan that will impact the academic success of low income student at a greater rate, closing the gap, what is unknown are the placement test scores of the assessed groups. While this study did not specifically address African America students, within the low income subgroup, their grade point averaged 1.76, well below that of all other GE attenders. Remarkably, this grade point average is even lower than before Great Expectations was implemented; 1.81 GPA.

The recommendation from this study lends itself to a post-orientation or success intervention to provide students more intentional coaching on resources and tools for academic success, life skills and career exploration. Likewise, a recommendation will be made to the Access2Success committee on campus to research best practices system-wide and nationally that address the deficit in academic success of the under-represented minority population, particularly the low income African-American student.

The Great Expectations Orientation and Registration program was successfully replicated this summer with assessments and results pending.
### Demographics

- **Women**: 65%
- **Men**: 35%
- **African American**: 18%
- **American Indian/Alaska Native**: Less than 1%
- **Hispanic**: 2%
- **Asian**: Less than 1%
- **White**: 74%
- **2 or more races**: 4%

**Average Age: 25**
Median ACT Scores 2011-12

- English: 18.1
- Mathematics: 17.5
- Reading: 18.5
- Science: 18.4
- Composite: **18.3**
Recent Enrollment Trend

Figure 3
First Time New Students: Success Rates/Grades in Online Courses

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Fall 2011: Pass Rate: 60%
Failure/Withdrawal Rate: 40%

Fall 2012: Pass Rate: 72.2%
Failure/Withdrawal Rate: 27.8%

Figure 4
Reference


Office of Institutional Effectiveness. Jackson State Community College.