

The Parent First-Year Experience on a Community College Campus

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This study explores the effects of a Parent First-Year Experience (PFYE) program at Washtenaw Community College. Specifically, the study addresses attitudes and perceptions of parents who participated in the PFYE program over the course of two years and the relationship between parent participation and students' academic success and retention. A total of 71 (year 1 n=37; year 2 n=34) parents responded to the online survey. Researchers learned that parents who participated in the PFYE understood the milestones of their students' first year and felt prepared to support their student through transition. Results indicated that the combination of parent orientation, e-newsletters, workshops, webinars, and online communication comprise an acceptable PFYE format. Beyond practical implications, this study serves as a launching point for future research and theories related to parental connectivity to the community college and further studies assessing the effects of PFYE programs.

Parents serve as a valuable resource to their student transitioning during the first year of college (Cutright, 2008). A family that encourages and supports higher education endeavors can be a strong indicator of student success (Ceja, 2006; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Building a partnership between a college or university and parents can channel parents' well-meaning efforts into positive outcomes for their students. Being in a community with students' parents and families can also extend institutional boundaries of influence, leading to increased enrollment (Coburn & Woodward, 2001) and retention (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Horn & Berger, 2004).

In 2009, Washtenaw Community College (WCC) sought to develop a clear path for community members to engage with the college in their role as parents of new WCC students. The Parent First-Year Experience (PFYE) was designed as a one-year program that began with Parent Orientation in the summer and continued through the academic year. The PFYE emphasized open communication between the college and parents to provide resources and information to best support their students' transition to college.

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PFYE Program Overview

Parents learned about the PFYE program either in-person at parent orientation or by mail through a postcard marketing the program. Parents opted to participate in the program by signing up with their contact information in-person, by phone, or by e-mail. The PFYE program included four main components: parent orientation, workshops and webinars, monthly e-newsletters, and online communication. During parent orientation, parents were asked about their experience using online and social media tools, and their positive responses led to combining both in-person and online forms into the program.

Parent Orientation

At WCC, parent orientation is offered three to four times during the summer before the students' first year. In this two-hour session, parents learn directly from department experts on topics of admission and registration, FERPA, financial aid, campus safety, student life, and academic support. Approximately 500 parents attended parent orientations in the summers of 2009 and 2010. Overall, parents positively evaluated the parent orientation program. After two years of evaluation feedback, 98% of parents thought the topics presented at parent orientation were relevant, and 97% thought the parent orientation session was useful. Additionally, 98% felt welcome at WCC. A majority of parents noted that they found the parent orientation valuable and worthy of recommendation to other parents. They especially valued receiving information from multiple departments, knowing the steps their students needed to complete before starting classes, and having an opportunity to ask questions of college staff.

Workshops/Webinars

In the first year of implementation, five in-person workshops were offered as part of the PFYE program. The topics covered in these workshops were setting realistic expectations, financial aid and budgeting, majors and careers, healthy boundaries, and recovering from failure. Two workshops were offered in the fall semester, and three were offered in the winter semester. Less than 10 parents attended the workshops, and one workshop was cancelled due to low response.

In the second year, the two workshops in the fall were offered in-person on WCC's main campus, and the majors and careers and healthy boundaries topics were offered as webinars in the winter semester. Webinars were included in the program during its second year in an effort to draw more participation from parents if they could learn about a particular topic from their location of choice; however, only three to four parents logged on to attend the live webinar. Webinars were recorded and archived as a resource for later viewing. This resource was shared as a link in the monthly e-newsletter. Parents who participated in the workshops and/or webinars valued the tips and resources shared and the small group

discussion format.

Monthly E-Newsletters

Parents who signed up for the PFYE were sent e-newsletters on the first Wednesday of each month from September through May. E-newsletters captured the milestones of the academic year and included tips and resources that could benefit their student during that particular month or milestone (e.g., during midterms, students can meet with counselors to ease test anxiety). In the first year, 115 parents were on the e-mail list, and there was a 49% average open rate. In the second year, 110 parents received the monthly e-newsletters with a 51% average open rate. Both years had a higher average open rate than other e-mail campaigns in the education and training industry (MailChimp, 2010).

Online Communication

In addition to monthly e-newsletters, parents could engage with a few other online forms of communication: the parents and families page on the WCC website, a Facebook page, and AOL Instant Messenger. Information on accessing the Facebook page and connecting on AOL Instant Messenger was included in every e-newsletter. Podcasts, discussion prompts, reminders, and links to archived webinars were posted on the Facebook wall. Parents did not engage as much with the Facebook page and live chat features, but these social media outlets prompted them to connect via e-mail. Given that few parents engaged with the online live features during year one, instant messenger and discussion prompts were no longer included in year two. The Facebook page continued, but primarily as a forum to post podcasts or archived webinars that were included as links in the e-newsletter.

PFYE Research

This research study was created to evaluate the Parent First-Year Experience program at WCC. The guiding question was as follows: What is the effect of the parent first-year experience on parents and their students? Specifically, the researchers wanted to answer the following questions: What are the attitudes and perception of parents who are involved in the PFYE? How does involvement in the PFYE influence parents' perceptions of WCC? In year two, an additional question was explored: What is the relationship between parent participation in the PFYE and their students' academic performance and retention?

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of parents of first-year students at Washtenaw Community College who registered for the PFYE at Parent Orientation or via e-mail during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 academic years. In the first year

of the study, the sample size was 181 with a 20% response rate. In the second year, the sample size was 117 with a 29% response rate. The industry average response rate to online surveys is 19.8% (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). The response rate for this study, although it seems low, is standard as it relates to the industry.

Instruments

Based on quantitative and qualitative methodology, the researchers created a survey with closed-ended questions, including Likert-scale, true and false, and yes and no options, as well as open-ended questions directed at eliciting information from parents about their attitudes and perceptions regarding their participation in the PFYE. This survey was modified in the second year of the program by adding questions. Both versions of this survey were administered online using SurveyMonkey™.

Data Collection

Parents who were involved in the PFYE were e-mailed in the summers of 2010 and 2011 with an invitation to participate in the study. The e-mail provided an introduction to the research study, a link to the online survey, and contact information should participants have questions regarding the study or procedures. Parents were asked to electronically sign an informed consent form. They had three weeks to complete and submit their responses to the online survey. Reminders were sent weekly and then daily as the deadline approached. The data collected focused on the first year of college for new, traditional-aged students who participated in orientation in the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 academic years. In order to analyze the academic outcomes of the new students whose parents participated in the PFYE, researchers reviewed students' academic transcripts and fall-to-fall enrollment.

Results

Over 70% of parents who participated in the PFYE had a baccalaureate degree or higher (73% in year 1 and 72% in year 2). Over half of the PFYE participants said that their student was the first child to attend college (78% in year one and 58% in year two). Additionally, less than 20% said that their student was the first in the family to go to college (11% in year one and 15% in year two). Data revealed that the most active participants in PFYE programming are not parents of first generation college students; furthermore, many are first-time college student parents.

PFYE Participants

TABLE 1.a

Question: My highest level of education is	Year 1 (n=37)		Year 2 (n=34)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Less than High School	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
High School Diploma	10	27.00%	9	28.10%
Baccalaureate Degree	17	45.90%	13	40.60%
Master's Degree	8	21.60%	8	25.00%
Doctoral Degree	2	5.40%	2	6.30%

TABLE 1.b

Question: My student is my first child to go to college.	Year 1 (n=37)		Year 2 (n=33)	
	Count	%	Count	%
True	29	78.40%	19	57.60%
False	8	21.60%	14	42.40%

TABLE 1.c

Question: My student is the first person in our nuclear family to attend college.	Year 1 (n=37)		Year 2 (n=33)	
	Count	%	Count	%
True	4	10.80%	5	15.20%
False	33	89.20%	28	84.80%

Parents' Perceptions

After participating in the PFYE, over 50% of parents felt that WCC supported them in their student's first year (57% in year one and 59% in year two). Parents also indicated that they understood the milestones of the first year in college (69% in both year one and year two) and felt prepared to support their students through the transition (69% in year one and 66% in year two). Questions about parents' sense of feeling welcome at the college and connecting with staff and other parents were also addressed in the survey.

Over 70% of parents felt welcome at the college (74% in year one and 84% in year two). About 50% of parents felt connected to staff at the college (46% in

year one and 53% in year two; however, less than 20% felt connected to other parents of new WCC students (3% in year one and 16% in year two). In year two of the PFYE study, researchers included additional questions to analyze parents' perceptions regarding the importance of connectivity. The findings indicate that parents perceive connectivity to staff at the college as more important than connectivity to other parents (69% and 25% respectively).

Parents' Perceptions

TABLE 2.a

Question: I felt I was supported by the college through my student's first year.	Year 1 (n=35)		Year 2 (n=32)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.90%	0	0.00%
Disagree	4	11.40%	5	15.60%
Neutral	10	28.60%	8	25.00%
Agree	15	42.90%	17	53.10%
Strongly Agree	5	14.30%	2	6.30%

TABLE 2.b

Question: I understood the milestones of my student's first year of college.	Year 1 (n=35)		Year 2 (n=32)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%	1	3.10%
Disagree	2	5.70%	3	9.40%
Neutral	9	25.70%	6	18.80%
Agree	16	45.70%	15	46.90%
Strongly Agree	8	22.90%	7	21.90%

TABLE 2.c

Question: I felt prepared to support my student through his/her first year.	Year 1 (n=35)		Year 2 (n=32)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.90%	1	3.10%
Disagree	1	2.90%	2	6.30%
Neutral	9	25.70%	8	25.00%
Agree	14	40.00%	14	43.80%
Strongly Agree	10	28.60%	7	21.90%

TABLE 2.d

Question: I felt welcome at WCC.	Year 1 (n=35)		Year 2 (n=32)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Disagree	2	5.70%	0	0.00%
Neutral	7	20.00%	5	15.60%
Agree	14	40.00%	13	40.60%
Strongly Agree	12	34.30%	14	43.80%

TABLE 2.e

Question: I felt connected with WCC staff.	Year 1 (n=35)		Year 2 (n=32)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.90%	0	0.00%
Disagree	3	8.60%	4	12.50%
Neutral	15	42.90%	11	34.40%
Agree	13	37.10%	14	43.80%
Strongly Agree	3	8.60%	3	9.40%

TABLE 2.f

Question: I felt connected with other WCC parents.	Year 1 (n=35)		Year 2 (n=31)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	2	5.70%	1	3.20%
Disagree	10	28.60%	11	35.50%
Neutral	22	62.90%	14	45.20%
Agree	1	2.90%	5	16.10%
Strongly Agree	0	0.00%	0	0.00%

TABLE 2.g

Question: It is important to me to feel connected to WCC staff.	Year 1 (n=0)		Year 2 (n=32)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	N/A	N/A	0	0.00%
Disagree	N/A	N/A	1	3.10%
Neutral	N/A	N/A	9	28.10%
Agree	N/A	N/A	17	53.10%
Strongly Agree	N/A	N/A	5	15.60%

TABLE 2.h

Question: It is important to me to feel connected to other WCC parents.	Year 1 (n=0)		Year 2 (n=32)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	N/A	N/A	0	0.00%
Disagree	N/A	N/A	4	12.50%
Neutral	N/A	N/A	20	62.50%
Agree	N/A	N/A	8	25.00%
Strongly Agree	N/A	N/A	0	0.00%

Influences on Parental Behavior

A few questions were included in the survey to explore any influences on behavior that may have been prompted by parents' participation in the PFYE. Parents were asked about their interest in programs for parents of second-year students, and about half of the respondents were interested in such programs (40% in year one and 63% in year two). Approximately 50% of parents indicated that they would consider taking classes at WCC (57% in year one and 50% in year two). Additionally, 15% of respondents in year one and 22% of respondents in year two would consider donating to the college. The majority of parents indicated that their students planned to enroll at WCC for a second year (87% in year one and 90% in year two).

Influences on Parental Behavior

TABLE 3.a

Question: I would be interested in programs for parents of second-year students.	Year 1 (n=35)		Year 2 (n=32)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.90%	0	0.00%
Disagree	4	11.40%	2	6.30%
Neutral	16	45.70%	10	31.30%
Agree	9	25.70%	16	50.00%
Strongly Agree	5	14.30%	4	12.50%

TABLE 3.b

Question: I would consider taking classes at WCC.	Year 1 (n=35)		Year 2 (n=32)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00%	2	6.30%
Disagree	1	2.90%	5	15.60%
Neutral	14	40.00%	9	28.10%
Agree	14	40.00%	12	37.50%
Strongly Agree	6	17.10%	4	12.50%

TABLE 3.c

Question: I would consider donating to WCC.	Year 1 (n=35)		Year 2 (n=32)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Strongly Disagree	2	5.70%	0	0.00%
Disagree	7	20.00%	8	25.00%
Neutral	21	60.00%	17	53.10%
Agree	4	11.40%	7	21.90%
Strongly Agree	1	2.90%	0	0.00%

TABLE 3.d

Question: Is your student planning to enroll at WCC in the fall?	Year 1 (n=31)		Year 2 (n=31)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Yes	27	87.10%	28	90.30%
No	4	12.90%	3	9.70%

Identification of Values

In the first year of the PFYE study, parents indicated that the most valuable aspect of the program was the opportunity to understand what their student will experience in their first year of college. In the second year, most parents primarily commented on the value of staying informed through the PFYE. In both years, parents noted the value of the e-newsletters and parent orientation more frequently than any other program feature. They also noted that online communication was preferred.

Future Programming and Improvements

In both years of the PFYE study, most parents were unsure about any additional programs or services in which they would be interested in participating. Parents indicated they desired direct connection with the college and its staff regarding their students' grades and finances. Most parents did not have suggestions to improve the PFYE within the bounds of FERPA.

Student Academic Performance

In the second year of the PFYE study, a student component was included to evaluate the influence of the program on student academic performance. Nine parents included their students' contact information for follow-up. None of the students who were e-mailed the brief five-question survey responded.

Researchers also conducted an analysis of transcripts of the nine students whose parents participated in the PFYE. Eight students were at college-level reading and writing and four students were at college-level math before their first semester at WCC. All the students in the sample had a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or better after their first year in college. The college mean cumulative GPA is 2.79 after the first year. Additionally, 78% (7 out of 9) enrolled for a second year at WCC. The college persistence rate from fall to fall semesters is 44.1%.

Conclusions

After analyzing two years of data, researchers learned that the goals of the PFYE program were met; parents understood milestones of the first year and felt prepared to support their students in transition. A PFYE model that includes parent orientation, e-newsletters, workshops, and webinars, as well as online communication is an acceptable format to connect with parents of new students. Findings also indicated that active participants in parent programs were well-educated, first-time college students' parents. The respondents to the surveys particularly valued learning about the milestones of the academic year that their students would encounter.

Interestingly, parents who participated in the PFYE program may potentially

enroll in classes at the college. Community colleges are in a unique position to engage with parents not only as supporters of their sons and daughters in college but also as prospective students. In addition, there may be a positive impact on parents' likelihood to donate to the college after participating in the PFYE. While there was only a small percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that they would consider donating to the college, the significance of those responses when converted into dollar amounts can greatly benefit community colleges. When generalized to the new student population, 22% of parents who would consider donating may mean that 19 full-time students with financial need could have their semester paid in full.

After two years of implementation, online communication seems to offer the best form of connecting with parents involved in the PFYE program. Participants prefer to have information and resources provided at their convenience, particularly in the monthly e-newsletter format that was well-received.

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. Primarily, small sample size and limits to the generalizability of the findings. Specifically, the student sample included in year two of the PFYE study is too small to draw any meaningful conclusions on the effects of PFYE on students and their academic performance; however, the data gathered from the nine academic transcripts seem to show a correlation between parents who participate in the program and successful students as measured by GPA and persistence; however, this effect could be a reflection of the home environment rather than the program.

Implications

The results of this study have implications for practice and theory as well as future research. In terms of implications for practice, the results of this study indicate that the current PFYE model at WCC is effective. Parents are pleased with the program and have a clear path through which to connect with the college. The research also uncovered that the parents served by the program were well-educated and first-time college parents, rather than parents of first-generation college students. This fact is important because it highlights that parent program participants at the community college may not be vastly different than those at four-year institutions.

Colleges seeking to implement programs like WCC's PFYE should assess their parental audience and ensure that programming aligns with the needs of that specific group.

Additional implications for practice relate to connecting parents with the institution. Data in this study suggest that parents prefer online communication. As a result, colleges seeking to communicate with parents should consider e-mails, online newsletters, blogs, or other online forums, both synchronous and

asynchronous; furthermore, as parents in this study indicated that connectivity with college staff and faculty members was important, practitioners should identify ways to utilize these online communication tools to support that function as well. Finally, online communication may also be a viable means to reach out to these parents to recruit them as potential students and donors.

In terms of implications for theory, several issues are highlighted by the results of this study. Currently, there is not a theoretical framework to explain parental engagement at a community college. There is a dearth of research exploring how parents connect with the community college or which parents choose to make a connection (i.e., why were the participants in this study overwhelmingly well-educated and first-time college parents?). Finally, a theoretical framework that directly addresses the relationship between participation in college parent programs and student retention/academic success is also needed.

The results of this study provide a meaningful starting place for future researchers. Future investigators should seek to better understand the link between PFYE programs and student success. Additionally, research can be conducted to find other effective PFYE models and test the most effective methods of online communication with parents. Researchers should develop studies that track the behaviors of PFYE participants after leaving the program (i.e., “Do they enroll as students?” and “Do they become donors?”). Longitudinal studies might also provide insight into the overarching effect of the PFYE program on expanding institutional boundaries in the community and the potential effect on local tax support.

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to benefit from a strong relationship with parents as this relationship not only benefits students, but also has the potential to directly impact enrollment (conversion of parents into students) and contribute to long-term fiscal stability (conversion of parents into donors). As such, this study can be viewed as the impetus for practitioners and institutions to begin fostering intentional parental pathways and developing programs designed to serve the needs of this group. The PFYE model developed at WCC is an example of such a program, and it is recommended that other community colleges consider it for adoption and adaption.

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