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Orientation for College Success: A Utilization-Focused Evaluation of the Student Orientation and Registration Program at the Steamboat Springs Campus of Colorado Mountain College

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The major findings of this evaluation fell into four broader categories of combined preparedness, academic preparedness, social preparedness, and program enhancements. Findings included: retention among SOAR participants was higher than non-SOAR participants, academic planning assisted students in feeling academically prepared, interaction with people and place allowed students to feel socially prepared, students felt overloaded with information, and student experiences during SOAR led to opportunities for program improvement. Recommendations were made to improve the SOAR program to better prepare students for their first semester of college.

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Orientation for College Success: A Utilization-Focused Evaluation of the Student Orientation and Registration Program at the Steamboat Springs Campus of Colorado Mountain College

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Student success and retention are significant topics in higher education. According to the United States Department of Education (2017) 75% of first-time undergraduate students retained their collegiate enrollment from 2015 to 2016. When specifically looking at student retention in community colleges, only 62% of students retained at their institution during that same timeframe (US Department of Education, 2017). An alarming example of this situation is at Colorado Mountain College (CMC), located in various Rocky Mountain communities in Colorado. Only 51% of students at CMC retained college-wide from August of 2015 to August of 2016 (Campus Portrait, 2017), which suggests that CMC may not be preparing students for their first semester. Community colleges across the United States are powerful learning environments that provide accessibility and affordability to a diverse population of students within higher education (Milliron & Wilson, 2004). As the attainment of a degree has become more essential, it has become more apparent that freshman entering higher education institutions are underprepared for college (Chan, 2017). This lack of preparation, along with a lack of institutional information and unclear student expectations, may lead to a difficult transition to college, underwhelming academic performance, and college

attrition (Rausch & Hamilton, 2006). These items can be addressed through an orientation program for new students, thereby increasing the likelihood of student retention and persistence.

For the purposes of this study, orientation means a program that takes place prior to student matriculation at a college or university that is meant to assist students in their transition to the institution. Orientation programming for new students at higher education institutions throughout the United States is commonplace with 96% of all colleges and universities offering some form of orientation (Barefoot, 2005). Orientation programs are designed to facilitate student learning and experience through the transitioning process, academic integration, and personal and social integration, thus leading to student retention and academic accomplishment (Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996). To achieve this experience, orientation often incorporates academic programming, campus information, and social activities to set the stage for a new student's first year of college. Additionally, orientation tends to bring an air of excitement and builds a comradery among everyone on campus to come together, welcoming new students and assisting them in their transition to college.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to complete a program evaluation of an orientation program in order to improve the program. The goal of the recommendations and improvement for the program was to better serve students, create a more meaningful orientation experience, and best prepare students for their first semester of college. The evaluation specifically focused on student perceptions of how the orientation program

prepared them for their first semester. This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions about their preparedness?
    a. In what ways do students feel orientation has prepared them for the academic aspects of college?
    b. In what ways do students feel that orientation has prepared them for the social aspects of college?
2. In what ways can student experiences enhance the SOAR program?

The research questions were designed to address how the students felt they experienced orientation through the lens of preparedness. To address this broader topic, the perceptions that students have about their own levels of preparedness to enter their first semester of college after attending orientation must be understood, which the first research question was designed to study. The first sub-question specifically examined how students believed that orientation helped prepare them for their academic career and the second sub-question addressed how students believed that orientation socially prepared them for college. These three questions in tandem with one another paint a larger picture about student perceptions of their preparedness through a new student orientation experience. The second research question was designed to address the experiences of students during orientation and how those could be utilized to enhance the program for future participants.

Evaluation Model

This study employed Michael Patton's (1978) Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) model. In the U-FE model, the evaluator must seek input and active engagement from identified stakeholders who are involved with the program being evaluated (Christie & Alkin, 2013). For the best results in U-FE, stakeholders must commit to utilization of the final evaluation, hence the evaluator must engage stakeholders in every phase of the evaluation to create a feeling of buy-in amongst the stakeholders (Patton, 1978). Patton's (1978) model is founded on the belief that the stakeholders will be more likely to use the results of the evaluation if they are active participants in the process.

Definition of Key Terms

Terms such as orientation, preparedness, and retention are used in various ways throughout higher education. It is important to describe how this study defines important key terms and how they have been used.

Orientation. A program that takes place prior to student matriculation at a college to assist students in their transition to the institution.

Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE). The evaluation method used to conduct this study. U-FE is use-based and requires input from stakeholders throughout the entire evaluation process.

U-FE Committee. The group of institution stakeholders from both Student and Academic Affairs that actively participated in the evaluation process.

Stakeholders. Members of the U-FE Committee

Transition. Any event or non-event that results in changes, including changes to relationships, previous assumptions, personal routines, and social roles (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). In this study, orientation is a transition.

Retention. A student staying at the institution beyond the first semester.

Preparedness. A student's level of readiness to enter college.

Academic preparedness. A student's academic readiness for college, including college preparatory high school work, standardized or placement test scores, understanding the academic policies of the institution, knowledge of their degree program, and the navigation of the collegiate advising and registration process.

Social preparedness. A student's social and cultural readiness for college, including navigating new relationships, navigating campus, identifying the physical lay-out of campus, understanding the social norms of the institution, and connecting with the institution.

Combined preparedness. A student's academic and social readiness for college.

Ecology of Transition. The theoretical framework used in this study. Ecology of Transition combines Nancy Schlossberg's (1981) Theory of Transition, Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST), and Samuel Museus's (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Model (CECE Model) to create its own model of ecological systems and transition.

Summary

This study is necessary to ensure students experience a level of preparedness and success that will encourage them to retain at their postsecondary institution. Less than

60% of students enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States graduate in six years or less (US Department of Education, 2017). Vincent Tinto (1988) suggests that the first six months of college are vital to student persistence. Orientation programs typically serve as one of the first points of intervention to students, making it a vital piece of student success. If students are not set-up to be prepared for their college experience, it is highly unlikely that they will retain and persist to graduation. Due to this trend, this study also focused on the retention of students who attended orientation from fall 2018 to spring 2019.

Orientation should be the best it can be for all participants in the program to ensure that students are walking away with the level of knowledge and preparedness they need to be successful at CMC. There are many models that can accomplish assisting students with transition to college but all orientation programs need to address both academic and social preparation to set students up to be successful in their first semester of college (Tinto, 1988).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The importance of receiving a college degree has increased over the past few decades. Since the 1990's there has been an evolution of aspirations in which young adults seek to be professionals as opposed to service and administrative workers that young adults had aspired to in previous generations (Louie, 2007). In conjunction with student aspirations, employers in the United States have placed more emphasis on hiring educated workers who can keep up with sophisticated technology, changes in the economy, and expansive global marketplace. It is estimated that about 64% of all jobs in the United States require some form of postsecondary education (Achieve, 2012). A degree, particularly a bachelor's degree, has become essential to earning higher wages and obtaining a middle-class lifestyle in the United States (Louie, 2007). In order to enroll and prepare students to successfully obtain their degree, institutions of higher learning must transition students into the academic and social fabric of the environment (Astin, 1984). Transition into college is an on-going challenge; providing the basic information students need to enroll clearly and accurately is always difficult to accomplish (Karp, 2011). As George Kuh (2009) explains, "Student transition to college

continues to be an area of investigation and an on-going challenge to various audiences on college campuses" (p.321).

Student Preparedness

A lack of preparedness among students is a common theme that can be seen when students drop-out of college (Public Agenda, 2009; Lamperez & Dereshiwsky, 2016). Due to the desire for a college degree, more students in recent years are applying for college with weaker preparation, leading to a possible explanation as to why a lower proportion of students are graduating from college (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2009; Gray-Nicolas, 2017). A student's decision to persist to graduation can be explained in part by levels of preparation for the college experience (Berger, Blanco Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012; Lamperez & Dereshiwsky, 2016). Elisabeth Barnett and Maggie Fay (2013) conducted qualitative research to look at student preparedness through the lens of the Common Core State Standards. Through their research, they concluded that there is no one definition of college-readiness, as some institutions consider academics alone while other institutions look at both academic and social readiness (National Center for Postsecondary Research, 2013).

It is important to consider both the academic and social preparedness as determining factors of college-readiness. To be college-ready, students must meet college-level academic standards, understand the college admission process, know how to obtain financial aid, and understand how to self-manage what will likely be a new and unstructured lifestyle compared to high school. A lack of information, guidance at school, and personal support, as well as inadequate academic preparation, lack of rigorous

coursework, and insufficient linkages between high schools and postsecondary institutions can lead students to be underprepared for college both academically and socially (College Preparation, 2006; Gray-Nicolas, 2017).

According to a national study conducted by Achieve, Inc. (2015), only 53% of college students felt that their high school had prepared them for college academics and six out of 10 students surveyed indicated that they would have worked harder in high school if they knew the level of expectation in college. Furthermore, only 35% of college instructors were satisfied with the level of preparation students received in their high school career (Achieve, 2015).

Academic Preparedness

Typically, academically unprepared students have never mastered the content and skills required in English and math (Bueschel, 2009). In 2011, 63% of college students entering a 2-year college needed remediation in at least one subject area (CollegeBoard, 2011). Academic college-readiness is often determined by standardized test scores, high school grades, high school coursework, recommendation letters, and application essays (CollegeBoard, 2018). Based on the threshold of each institution, applicants are either academically prepared or they are not. Only a small percentage of students who enter college academically underprepared are able to complete the pre-collegiate coursework and move on to college-level coursework successfully (Bueschel, 2009).

A quantitative study conducted in Texas found that less than one-third of Texas graduating seniors in 2007 were college-ready in both reading and math, suggesting current educational policies need to be re-examined through the lens of college-readiness

(Moore et al., 2010). Additionally, Moore et al. (2010) state that the data they collected can be used to create intervention strategies to enhance college preparedness, such as orientation programming, transition courses, and learning communities (Moore et al., 2010). Another study proposes that students may be more academically prepared during their first semester if faculty members check-in weekly about the pace and expectations of the class, create concept maps, and set weekly reminders for students (Nunez Rodriquez et al., 2017).

Academic preparedness can also bleed into the beginning stages of attending college. Academic preparedness may encompass students navigating the registration process at an institution and the level of academic planning the student has done prior to enrolling. Academically underprepared students are less likely to have an academic plan in place, making the process of enrolling in college overwhelming (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). Additionally, trying to accomplish registration in bulk can leave students feeling misinformed about their academic plans, leading them to feel academically unprepared to begin college (Goomas, 2012).

Social Preparedness

Society expects critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, problem solving, and cultural competencies of all college graduates, however, students are not entering college ready to master these skills (Nunez Rodriquez et al. 2017). Social and cultural preparedness can assist students in navigating the many demands of the college environment to improve the likelihood of graduation (Sommerfeld, 2011). While this is much more difficult to measure than academic preparedness, it may help some students

overcome other barriers they may encounter, including academic barriers (College Preparation, 2006).

Social and cultural knowledge can include confidence in attaining a college degree, habits for learning, knowledge about careers, and knowledge needed to plan for college which includes navigating the admissions process, financing the education and building a sense of belonging on campus (College Preparation, 2006). Further, it includes building relationships with peers, faculty, and staff, which is an essential part of the student collegiate experience (Karp, 2011). Krista Soria, Beth Lingren Clark, and Laura Coffin Koch (2013) suggest that the best way to foster positive social connections is to place students into small peer groups as opposed to expecting them to navigate the larger group setting. Terrell L. Strayhorn (2012) states, "By interacting frequently (and in positive ways) with others on campus, students establish meaningful relationships (e.g. friendships), which in turn can be seen as supportive resources that can be brought to bear on the college experience. Such feelings will enhance students' commitments, connections, and consequently, retention."

A 2017 cohort study comprised of high school and college faculty in New York found that in order to increase social preparedness, high school and college faculty alike should decrease social distance between themselves and the students in order to address the social needs, backgrounds, and expectations of students (Nunez Rodriquez et al., 2017). Gray-Nicolas (2017) found through her research that students, teachers, and administrators all view social-emotional college preparedness differently: (1) students believed it to mean being ready to mentally and emotionally transition, (2) teachers

perceived it as understanding of time management, self-awareness, and the ability to ask for help and communicate with instructors, and (3) administration perceived it to mean students had mastered advocacy and coping skills.

Combined Preparedness

Preparation can take many forms and may be completely different for each student; some will experience this through their high school, some from attitudes at home, and others from programs such as GEAR-UP and UpwardBound (College Preparation, 2006). Other students will be completely underprepared. Gray-Nicolas (2017) found through her doctoral research that students who participated in a pre-college transition program are more likely to have a smoother transition and introduction to college, accumulate more credits, and are more academically and socially well-adjusted.

Overall, the research shows students are underprepared to enter college and that this can affect their collegiate experience. The majority of studies agree that better and continuous dialogue between high schools and institutions of higher education can improve programming, create clear expectations, and assist students with their college experience (Moore et. al, 2010; Lamperez & Dereshiwsky, 2016; Nunez Rodriquez et al., 2017; Gray-Nicolas, 2017). Additionally, studies suggest that students who participate in pre-college transition programs during high school are more academically and socially prepared for college (Gray-Nicolas, 2017).

Combined preparedness often takes shape in the form of students feeling a sense of belonging on campus. Academic and social involvement at an institution often influences students' sense of belonging, and sense of belonging can influence students'

levels of involvement in academic and social activities (Strayhorn, 2012). Furthermore, a student's academic and social involvement, and therefore sense of belonging, can have a positive impact on the academic achievement and retention of the student (Astin, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012).

A postsecondary institution cannot fix the academic under-preparedness overnight; this piece takes time and requires students to successfully complete a series of developmental or remedial education courses. However, colleges can aid students in the process of social and cultural preparedness. This is where first-year transition programs, including orientation, can assist students in their transition to college and contribute to their level of preparedness.

Orientation Programs in the United States

Vincent Tinto (1987) theorized that integrating students into the social and academic fabric of an institution is essential to student retention and success. Many higher education institutions are helping students achieve preparedness by offering new student orientation programs, which are commonplace in the United States with 96% of all colleges and universities offering some form of orientation (Barefoot, 2005). Orientation programs are designed to facilitate student learning and experience through the transition process, academic integration, and personal and social integration, thus impacting student retention and academic accomplishment (Robinson, et al., 1996; Koch & Gardner, 2014). Furthermore, Soria et al. (2013) suggest, "First-year student programs, including new student orientation, are critically important to higher education institutions because they are well-positioned to make the most positive impact on overall student

retention" (p. 34). To achieve this experience, orientation often incorporates academic programming, campus information, and social activities to set the stage for a new student's first year of college.

History of Orientation

There is some discrepancy among researchers as to the history of orientation in the United States. Some research traces the earliest orientation efforts to 1888 at Harvard University (Strumpf, Sharer, & Wawryznski, 2003; Butts, 1971; CAS, 2014) while others trace it to Boston University that same year (Drake, 1966; CAS, 2014). These early orientation programs were established as student support systems, with upperclassmen assisting the new students in their transition to college (Strumpf et al., 2003; Drake, 1966; CAS, 2014).

The first known modern orientation program, called Freshman Week, was held in September, 1923 by the University of Maine. The program's founder, Dr. Clarence Cook Little, explained that his creation of Freshman Week stemmed from a, "Study of undergraduate records [that] showed that there was a high degree of maladjustment and a large number of drop-outs soon after the students came [to UM]" (Finnegan & Alleman, 2013, p. 96). Dr. Little went on to identify factors he believed were particularly important, including homesickness, loneliness, and an overall lack of college understanding (Finnegan & Alleman, 2013). Freshman Week was designed with dual purposes in mind: (1) to help students transition from high school to college and (2) to allow faculty and staff to observe the abilities and skills of their new students. By the

early-1930s such events were common practice across the country (Finnegan & Alleman, 2013; Mullendore & Banahan, 2005).

After World War II, the landscape of higher education began to change, creating a shift in orientation programs to accommodate a more diverse student population (Strumpf et al., 2003). In the mid-20th century, freshman orientation was more of a social event, however in the 1990s the focus of orientation underwent significant changes to become more comprehensive and well-structured, addressing pertinent academic and cultural issues that students might encounter on campus (DePalma, 1991). Colleges began to recognize the benefits of acclimating students to campus culture assisted student success. Therefore, orientation programs continued to be strengthened in an effort to prepare students to stay at the institution and ultimately receive their degree (DePalma, 1991; CAS 2014).

While orientation has evolved over time, the intention remains the same. The concerns Dr. Little wanted to address with the first Freshmen Week, such as attrition, maladjustment, homesickness, loneliness, and lack of understanding, are still concerns that postsecondary institutions face today (Robinson et al., 1996; Mann, Andrews, & Rodenberg, 2010; Koch & Gardner, 2014; CAS, 2014). Furthermore, orientation programs are designed to foster connections among students and create a sense of community, thus making students feel like they belong (Astin, 1984; Robinson et al. 1996; Mann et al., 2010). This sense of community and belonging can aid in addressing some of the debilitating factors that students may experience, thereby leading to college

success (Finnegan & Alleman, 2013). Knowing why these changes happened in the past can lay the groundwork for constructing a successful orientation program today.

Orientation Programs Today

One of the biggest changes that has been observed over the past several decades is that orientation is now considered a comprehensive process instead of an individual program (CAS, 2014). This can be seen in the plethora of formats by which orientation programing is offered, including summer orientation programs, fall orientation programs, hybrid orientation programs, off-campus programs, online orientation, parent and family orientation, and summer bridge programs. More specific information about each of these orientation formats is available in Appendix A. Various formats of orientation programs account for differing student populations, however the traditional orientation formats are designed to serve the traditional, residential population (Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles, 2008).

Orientation programs are typically one of the first points of outreach and intervention to students, as they are typically attended prior to becoming a student (Koch & Gardner, 2014; Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). According to the most recent standards of orientation provided by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2014) orientation programs must be designed to "facilitate the transition of new students into the institution, prepare students for the institution's educational opportunities and student responsibilities, and initiate the integration of new students into the intellectual, cultural, and social facets of the institution" (p. 5). The primary mission

of orientation is to assist students in their transition to college; orientation programs can play a critical role in the early collegiate experiences of new students (Kuh, 2009).

Most orientation experiences provide students with an opportunity to familiarize themselves with campus, which helps them feel comfortable in their new environment (Chasteen, 2005; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Robinson et al., 1996). Additionally, orientation programs today provide a clear and thorough introduction to the academic, cultural, and social facets of the institution, creating a connection to the institution and creating a supportive campus environment (CAS, 2014; Levitz & Noel, 1989). Over the last 20 years there has been a shift in which orientation has taken a more serious academic tone (Robinson et al., 1996). Activities to facilitate academic transition include placement testing, academic advising, and class registration. Peer leaders are typically trained to facilitate small group activities, creating further opportunity to connect students and create meaningful orientation experiences (CAS, 2014; Posner & Rosenberger, 1997). Orientation programs are also often structured to provide information to students about academic programs, grading policies, academic expectations, and time and study commitments for academic success (Robinson et al., 1996; Mann et al., 2010; CAS, 2014). Finally, orientation programs provide information to students about the social environment, including behavioral norms, institutional values, and sensitive subjects such as diversity, drug and alcohol use, Title IX issues, and personal safety (Robinson et al. 1996; Mann et al., 2010).

While all of the information provided during orientation programs today is vital to student success, there comes a point where colleges and universities may be overloading

students with information, leading students to feel overwhelmed and anxious (Bawden & Robinson, 2009; Khalid, Saeed, & Syed, 2016). 'Information overload' is a term used to describe the feeling of too much information in regards to the quantity, quality, and delivery of the information being shared (Khalid et al., 2016). This typically "occurs when information received becomes a hindrance rather than a help, even though the information is potentially useful" (Bawden & Robinson, 2009, p. 183). Imperative enrollment information is often disseminated to students in multiple formats and all at once, leading students to selectively decide what is important to them individually, as it would be near impossible to remember everything (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). To curb information overload, it is important to account for various types of student learning and the method of providing information (Bawden & Robinson, 2009; Khalid et al., 2016).

Orientation Research

A study conducted by David Deggs et al. (2011) found there was not a significant difference in the understanding of campus policies and regulations between students who attended orientation and students who did not. However, the study indicated a significant difference between orientation attendees and non-attendees participating in campus social activities (Deggs et al., 2011). This suggests that students who do not attend orientation programs are less likely to get involved on campus, which means they are less likely to remain a student (Astin, 1984). Importantly, 79.3% of students who attended orientation indicated that they gained an understanding of university academic policies during orientation (Deggs et al., 2011). This indicates that orientation remains an important transitional program for new students.

Additionally, Michael Miller, Beverly Dyer, and Daniel Nadler (2002) conducted a study at an urban research institution in the southeastern part of the United States in which they administered a survey to new students who participated in orientation to assess student satisfaction with their experience. The data collected indicates that the four objectives accomplished by orientation that students considered most important were: (1) it assisted in developing positive relationships with other new students, (2) it provided awareness for institutional services and academic policies, (3) it helped students develop familiarity with campus and physical surroundings, and (4) it promoted awareness of non-classroom opportunities (Miller et al, 2002). Students strongly indicated that social activities during the program were essential to their orientation experience, however the data suggests that important technical information may have been overlooked by orientation participants due to a busy schedule of events (Miller et al, 2002). This suggests orientation programs may need to be developed in a more focused and intentional way to ensure students are getting the information they need, while still providing the social experience they desire.

A study that examined the extent to which students learned through the orientation program found that the three areas where students had the highest level of learning were: (1) how to register for classes, (2) the ability to identify co-curricular opportunities, and (3) the ability to state the location and services of multiple campus departments (Smith Rodine, & Williams, 2012). The two areas that had the least learning from orientation were career opportunities and communication with their advisor (Smith

et al., 2012). It is important to ensure that all five of these topics are being effectively presented during orientation to produce quality learning for new students.

As these studies indicate, offering orientation is a best practice among institutions as orientation programs are important transitional events. Deggs et al. (2011) found that out of the students who attended orientation in their study, 74.1% agreed that attending orientation was an important step to their collegiate success. Additionally, students self-reported that developing connections, understanding academic policies, creating a familiarity with campus, and attending social activities were important topics addressed and learned during orientation (Miller et al, 2002; Deggs et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012). Since students value these areas, they should be included in orientation programming. It is important for the professionals who plan orientation to keep in mind these promising practices when planning and evaluating their own orientation programs.

Retention

Retention is an idea that colleges and universities inherently struggle with, as there are many factors that can lead to retention or attrition. According to Kuh (2009) student perceptions regarding how the institution supported the academic and social transition of students is a major element that impacts whether or not a student will retain at the institution, further explaining, “A successful transition to college has been consistently linked to overall measures of student success and retention” (p. 321). Effective orientation programming may increase the likelihood of student persistence by facilitating academic and social integration from the start of their collegiate experience (Astin, 1993). Jayne Drake (2011) describes three key elements of retention: (1) connect

students to the institution early in their college experience through learning support systems (e.g. tutoring), (2) provide comprehensive first-year programming (e.g. orientation), and (3) provide robust academic advising, which may be the most important factor to retention. Introductions to these three elements typically take place during orientation programming.

Multiple literature posits that academic advising is vital to student retention, as it impacts students' academic and social integration into the community and it has been found that student satisfaction with academic advising is correlated to retention and the overall satisfaction of the college experience (Goomas, 2012; Hale, Greham, & Johnson, 2009; Joslin, 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1987; Woods, Richard, Park, Tandberg, Hu, & Bertrand Jones, 2017). Furthermore, Drake (2001) explains that academic advising is valuable to student retention because it can assist students with academic and career planning, encourage them to utilize support services, and allow for contact between students and faculty outside of the classroom, fostering the advisor-advisee relationship. The relationship that students create with members of the faculty have an influential role in how students perform academically, their retention, and their connection to the institution (Larsen, 2016; Schriener, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). Hale et al. (2009) postulate, "Given the important role of academic advising in student retention, serious efforts to improve retention should be grounded in an evaluation of student perceptions, desires, and satisfaction with academic advising" (p. 315).

Students are more likely to retain at an institution if they feel cared for and connected to the institution and their peers (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Students who are not socially prepared for college may be at more risk of attrition due to social isolation, personal-emotional issues, negative attitudes about the campus environment, or a lack of attachment to the institution (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Martin, Swartz-Kulstadt, & Madson,1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1987; Wilder, 1983). Students who are able to create meaningful relationships with their peers early in the college career often have a more established sense of belonging, which leads to a higher likelihood of retention (Strayhorn, 2012).

Additionally, the physical environment of the campus may influence student academic and social involvement, therefore impacting sense of belonging and retention (Kuh, 2009). Students need to learn how to navigate the physical environment to feel comfortable in their space and know where to go on campus for various needs (Karp, 2011). If campus resources and activities are easily accessible, students will be more likely to utilize them, creating positive social interactions (Karp, 2011; Kuh, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

To effectively frame the study of orientation, we can look at Nancy Schlossberg's (1981) theory of transition, Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST), and Samuel Museus's (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environment Model (CECE Model). Combining these three theories will create a framework of understanding orientation as an ecological transition. Before creating this framework, it is important to acknowledge Tinto's (1988) theory of student integration, in which students must

undergo periods of separation, transition, and integration, as the foundation of orientation programming. While Tinto's (1988) theory is the theory that many orientation programs are based on, it has been critiqued as an outdated theory that is non-inclusive of historically marginalized communities, places too much responsibility on the student and too little on the institution, and does not account for a student's psychological connection to the institution (Museus, 2014; Bensimon, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Theory of Transition

Schlossberg (1981) identifies the foundation of her theory as stemming from human adaptation to transition. Schlossberg (1981) explained, "A transition can be said to occur if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). More simply put, a transition is any event or non-event that results in changes, including changes to relationships, previous assumptions, personal routines, and social roles (Evans et al., 2010). Schlossberg's theory is quite complex and there are a tremendous number of variables that can affect the outcome of an individual's transition, including the individual's perceptions of transition, environmental characteristics, and individual characteristics. In Schlossberg's model, the goal of transition is to ultimately integrate the transitional experience into one's everyday life, which is what Schlossberg refers to as adaptation (Schlossberg, 1981). Please see figure 1 to view a model of human transition.

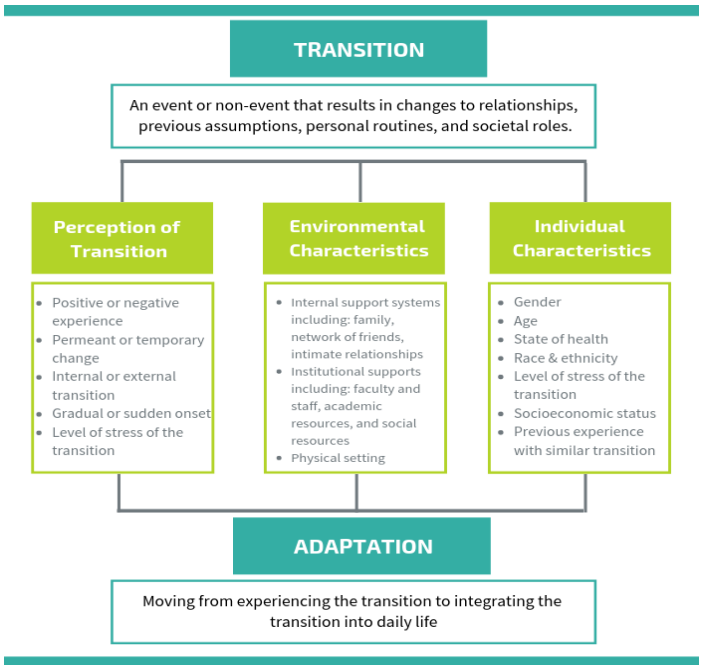

Figure 1: Adaptation of Schlossberg's Model of Human Transition

Looking at this model specifically through the lens of orientation as a transition, there are many factors that can lead the student from transition to adaptation. Through this lens, orientation is an event that results in changed relationships, assumptions, routines, and roles for the individual experiencing it. Individuals' perceptions of the transition will be formed by whether they had a positive or negative experience during orientation, whether they view the transition into college as a permanent or temporary change, and the level of stress orientation created for them (Schlossberg, 1981).

Environmental characteristics of orientation include: (1) individuals' internal support system which may consist of family, friends, and intimate relationships, (2) institutional supports which may consist of faculty, staff, academic resources, and social resources, and (3) the physical setting of orientation itself. It is important to note that

these characteristics may be different pre-transition and post-transition to understand how orientation may have changed their relationships with their support systems and the institution. Finally, individual characteristics such as gender/gender identity, age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and previous experience attending orientation programming, can influence how individuals experience orientation. These factors all lead to each individual's ability to adapt to the transition, meaning that the individual has successfully transitioned to incorporate their orientation experience into his or her daily life as a student in their first semester of college (Schlossberg, 1981).

Schlossberg's theory further posits that there are three major pieces to any transition: (1) Approaching Transitions, (2) Taking Stock, and (3) Taking Charge (Schlossberg, Anderson, & Goodman, 2012). The first part, Approaching Transition, helps identify the type of transition that has occurred. This includes identifying if the transition is an event or nonevent, as well as if it was an anticipated or unanticipated transition (Schlossberg et al., 2012). For the purposes of this study, orientation can clearly be categorized as an event, as all participants have attended the program.

Orientation may fall into both the anticipated and unanticipated event categories, depending on each individual's pre-transition experiences. A student who has always had the goal and expectation to go to college would likely consider orientation an anticipated transition to aid in the anticipated college experience. A student who had previously determined that he or she did not want to attend or has been discouraged from attending college would likely consider orientation an unanticipated event, as he or she was not planning to attend an orientation program (Schlossberg et al. 2012).

To explain the idea of Taking Stock, Schlossberg (2008) created the 4 S System to describe the factors that influence how an individual may cope with change. The four sets of factors are: (1) Situation, (2) Self, (3) Support, and (4) Strategies. Please view figure 2 to read the influential factors within each category. Orientation plays a role in the Situation and Support categories. Further, orientation programming has the opportunity to educate participants regarding Strategies to assist students in coping with the transition to college.

<table>
<tr>
<td>Situation

• Trigger (of the transition)
• Timing
• Control
• Role change
• Duration
• Previous experience with similar transitions
• Concurrent stress
• Assessment</td>
<td>Support
Social support
Level 1: Non-role dependent
• Close Family
• Close friends
• Partner
Level 2: Somewhat role related; may change over time
• Family, relatives
• Friends (work, neighborhood, school, etc.)
Level 3: Directly related to role; most likely to change over time
• Neighbors
• Co-workers
• Supervisors
• Distant family
• Professionals
• Casual acquaintances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self
Personal Demographics
• Socioeconomic status
• Gender/gender identity
• Sexual orientation
• Age
• State of health
• Race & ethnicity
Psychological resources
• Ego development
• Outlook (optimism and self-efficacy)
• Commitment
• Values
• Spirituality
• Resilience</td>
<td>Strategies

Modify the situation:
• Negotiation
• Optimistic action
• Self-reliance vs. advice-seeking
• Exercise of potency vs. helpless resignation
Control the meaning of the problem:
• Positive comparisons
• Selective ignoring
• Substitution of rewards
Aid in managing stress:
• Emotional discharge
• Self-assertion
• Passive forbearance</td>
</tr>
</table>

Figure 2: The 4 S System Factors

Finally, Schlossberg et al. (2012) created an integrative model of transition to help explain the process of Taking-Charge. This model is based on three fluid stages of transition, which are: *moving in, moving through*, and *moving out*. In the *moving in* stage, Schlossberg et al. (2012) posit that all students entering a new educational environment have some common agendas and needs, stating, "Institutions need to devote time to orientation, a process designed to help individuals know what is expected of them" (p. 44). The *moving in* stage can include learning the ropes, socialization, and introductions to individuals' new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions (Schlossberg et al., 2012).

The second stage of transition, *moving through*, helps students deal with challenges, such as creating balance between school and other parts of their lives, finding the support that they need, and grouping their new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions within their lives. The *moving through* stage may sometimes be a long transitional period, leading students to question their decision to enter college and may need support in sustaining their commitment to school (Schlossberg et al., 2012).

Moving out is the final stage of transition where students separate from the institution, exit their roles as students, and disengage from many of the relationships, routines, and assumptions they had previously created. While the *moving out* stage is the end, it is also the beginning of the next transitional period for students, meaning that an individual will be ever-moving through these stages in a cyclical fashion throughout his or her lifetime (Schlossberg, et al., 2012). Further information regarding how orientation programming relates to the Theory of Transition can be found in Appendix B.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory (EST) is a prominent psychological theory which posits that "an individual's development occurs through complex interactions between an individual and the people, objects, and symbols in that person's surrounding environment" (Longe, 2016, p. 346). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory focuses on the individual, the environment surrounding the individual, and, most importantly, the evolving interaction between the two. Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes his theory as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian nesting dolls" (p. 3). Figure 3visually depicts these systems nesting within each other as Bronfenbrenner describes.

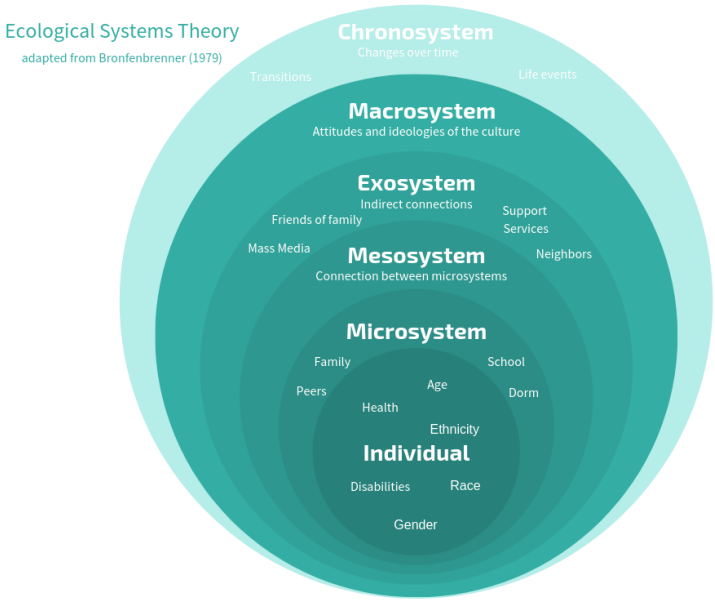

Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

There are five total systems that encase the smallest nesting doll, the individual. The individual consists of the personal information and demographics of that person. This includes, but is not limited to, an individual's gender, gender identity, age, race, ethnicity, state of health, learning or physical disabilities, and sexual orientation. The first system encasing the individual is called the microsystem. The microsystem is the collection of the institutions, groups, and people that most directly impact the individual's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem for a student entering college is usually comprised of family, peers, previous school community, and religious institutions. This is arguably the most important system to the individual, as it consists of the people closest to them who will be their cheerleaders, influencers, and support system throughout their collegiate experience.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to the second system beyond the individual as the mesosystem. The mesosystem is specifically focused on the connection between microsystems. This can include the relationships forged between parents and faculty, parents and staff, and family and peers during orientation. The mesosystem is also where role transitions of the individual may take place, as they involve a change in setting and in social position (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Orientation is the beginning of the role transition for the individual to becoming a college student.

The third system is known as the exosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines the exosystem as social settings that the individual is linked to but does not necessarily play an active role in. An example of this would be if an individual's parent got a promotion at work. This could create a change in the interaction between the parent and the individual,

but it is outside of the immediate sphere of the individual's control. Other examples of the exosystem may include mass media, social media, and support services. In regards to orientation, the exosystem may encompass changes to the orientation program made by staff members at the institution that will impact how the individual interacts with orientation, but is external to the individual.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the fourth system as the macrosystem, which refers to the larger culture in which the individual lives. This includes the country, state, and town in which they reside, their socioeconomic status, their cultural upbringing, as well as their school and workplace. The macrosystem of orientation is the town in which the institution resides, the residence hall or off-campus home that students reside in during orientation, the larger values of the community, the college campus, and the institution itself.

The fifth system is known as the chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1981) defines the chronosystem as the patterning of environmental events and transition throughout one's life. In regards to orientation, this would mean considering how an individual's previous experiences have led him or her to enroll in a particular institution and how those previous experiences may affect the individual's interaction with the orientation program. Looking toward the future, this would also encompass how orientation influences what the individual is like as a student throughout their time in college.

Each of these systems have their own set of roles, norms, and rules that can help shape the individual's development. Furthermore, all of the systems are interrelated. If the relationships in the microsystem suffer, the individual will not easily be able to

navigate through the other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is essential that orientation programming embrace students' microsystems to help create a successful transition to college. Further information regarding how orientation programming relates to Ecological Systems Theory can be found in Appendix C.

The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model

The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (CECE Model) theorizes that students who encounter more culturally engaging campus environments are more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging, have a more positive outlook on their academic work, and perform better academically, and ultimately, are more likely to persist to graduation (Museus, 2014). To develop the CECE Model, Museus (2014) has reframed Tinto's theory of integration to include a more diverse population of students whose cultures all have different beliefs and practices, creating a concept of cultural integration. This theory is based on the notion that students are from different backgrounds and can perceive and experience environments and interactions with those environments in different ways.

Samuel Museus, Varaxy Yi, & Natasha Saelua (2017) define the concept of cultural integration as a way in which educators can integrate academic, social, and cultural elements into the student experience to create a sense of belonging for students. Students of color have lower degree attainment rates than those of white students, in part due to the predominantly white culture practiced at institutions of higher education (Museus et al., 2017). Museus (2014) designed the CECE Model as a response to the need for colleges and universities to be more inclusive of a variety of racial and ethnic

groups. Furthermore, Museus (2014) acknowledges in his theory that external influences, such as family and finances, as well as pre-collegiate inputs, such as academic preparation, can shape a student's success and outcomes. Students from some cultures may be more successful in college by taking advantage of community capital via creating a college-going culture within their community (Kiyama et al., 2015).

The CECE model includes nine specific elements of a culturally engaging campus environment that "engage students' racially diverse cultural backgrounds or identities, reflect their diverse needs as they navigate their respective institutions, and facilitate their success in college" (Museus, 2014, p. 210). These nine indicators fall into two categories: cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness (Museus et al., 2017). Cultural relevance refers to the degree in which students' cultural backgrounds relate to a campus environment (Museus et al., 2017). Categories of cultural relevance include: (1) *cultural familiarity* which centers around the extent a student has the opportunity to connect with faculty, staff, and peers who understand their culture, (2) *culturally relevant knowledge* which centers around the opportunity students have to exchange knowledge about their culture, (3) *cultural community service* which is the opportunity for students to give back to their community in a positive way while on campus, (4) *meaningful cross-cultural engagement* which allows students from diverse cultural backgrounds to come together and discuss social and political issues, and (5) *culturally validating environments* which refers to how an institution programs for and responds to the needs of culturally diverse populations (Museus et al., 2017).

Musesus et al. (2017) define cultural responsiveness as "the extent to which campus programs and practices effectively respond to the needs of culturally diverse student populations" (p. 192). The indicators that fall under cultural responsiveness are: (1) *collectivist cultural orientations* which refers to the values of teamwork and mutual success over individualism and competition, (2) *humanized education environments* which refers to faculty, staff, and administrators that care about and are committed to students and are willing to develop meaningful relationships with them, (3) *proactive philosophies* which are the beliefs of the institutional employees to go above and beyond to make information and opportunities readily available to students, and (4) *holistic support* in which students have access to at least one trusted faculty or staff member who they can lean on for support and who will help them through the collegiate experience (Museus et al., 2017). This is where orientation can prove most effective, as it is a program within the larger culture. Orientation in itself cannot change the cultural relevance indicators, however, orientation programs can affect the cultural responsiveness indicators, ensuring that the program is responding to the needs of and inclusive of students from various backgrounds.

Museus (2014) identifies that students must transition into college, but frames it through the lens of cultural responsiveness, placing the responsibility of transition on the institution. Museus suggests that creating humanized education environments and holistic support for students are two essential areas to assist students in their transition process from their previous education environment to the new institution (Museus, 2014).

Further, the idea of holistic support is imperative to the transition and success of historically marginalized populations and first-generation students (Museus et al., 2017).

For a student to feel a sense of belonging, which is the ultimate goal of integration in the CECE Model, institutions must take into account the external and individual influences of a student, such as their academic preparedness, financial, and family situations, in conjunction with the cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness of the institution (Museus, 2014). Further information about the relationship between orientation and the CECE Model can be found in Appendix D.

Intersectionality of Theories: The Ecology of Transition

While all three of these theories are strong on their own, they can be combined to create a framework to explain transitions ecologically, which will henceforth be called the Ecology of Transition. Please see Appendix E for a quick glance at these theories side-by-side. The theory of transition postulates that when a transitional event occurs it will result in changes to relationships, previous assumptions, personal routines, and social roles (Evans et al., 2010). These changes thereby impact the personal ecological systems of the individual, specifically the relationships in the microsystem and the social changes of the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The best way to construct this framework will be to use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Russian nesting doll model and place the theory of transition and CECE Model within it. Please refer to figure 3 on page 28 to reference the visual model of EST.

Individual

Schlossberg (1981), Bronfenbrenner (1979), and Museus (2014) all agree that the personal demographics and previous experiences of the individual impact the transitional experience. The individual is the inner-most system of EST that the rest of the systems encapsulate. The individual includes personal demographic information including gender, age, race, ethnicity, state of health, learning and physical disabilities, and sexual orientation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the same vein, Schlossberg (1981) accounts for individual characteristics as part of the transition process, acknowledging that personal demographics and previous experience with similar transitions will affect one's ability to adapt to the transition. The individual demographics of students are the nucleus of the CECE Model, specifically designed to create more supportive environments for a culturally diverse population (Museus, 2014).

Schlossberg (2008) further offers Self as a coping mechanism for transition in the 4 S System. Self obviously encompasses the personal demographics discussed above; however, Schlossberg argues it includes much more than that. Self can also include the less obvious, but just as important traits of the individual, such as personality and outlook. Furthermore, it is imperative that individuals know and understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and inner resources (Schlossberg, 2008). Knowing and utilizing one's self as a resource is critical in effectively managing transition.

Microsystem

The microsystem is perhaps the most important of all the systems to each individual. The microsystem is comprised of the people, groups, and institutions that

most directly interact with and impact the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is where the individual's friend's family, romantic partners, and other influential people exist in the framework, which Schlossberg (1981) characterizes as the internal support system. She also suggests that this group can be used as a tool to help the individual cope with transition under the Support factor in her 4 S System (Schlossberg, 2008). Museus (2014) further emphasizes that these family members and surrounding community members are influencers that can ultimately help shape the individual's success and outcomes in college.

Schlossberg (1981) adds some additional environmental characteristics as institutional supports during the transition. This would widen the microsystem to include faculty, staff, and academic and social resources that a student may encounter during their orientation experience. For students from a non-dominant culture, the importance of having cultural familiarity, including faculty, staff, and peers who understand their cultural is imperative to their sense of belonging and adaptation into college (Museus, 2014). It is important to note that the people and groups within the microsystem may grow and change during an individual's transition and adaptation.

Museus et al. (2017) stress the idea of cultural responsiveness to assist students with their transition. The idea of creating humanized educational, proactive philosophies, and holistic support create a microsystem in themselves, establishing a supportive and trustworthy group of institutional employees for students (Museus et al., 2017). While extremely important to the success of historically marginalized populations, one could argue that this is a necessity for all students; it would behoove orientation programs to

create these connections, one-on-one supports, and view of the institution as a resource right from the beginning to assist students with their level of comfort and transition into college.

Mesosystem

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) mesosystem is quite complex, involving changes in relationships between microsystems as well as role transitions. As students attend the orientation program, the relationships between their microsystems will change. For example, an individual's parent may form a relationship with a faculty member or peer, which may impact the individual.

The mesosystem is also where the role transitions of the individual actually take place (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This includes the *moving in* and *moving through* phases of transition. During the *moving in stage* the individual must learn the ropes of the transition, understand the expectations, and meet new people that will aid them in the transition to college (Schlossberg et al., 2012). Orientation programming is designed to assist students do just this and is the first step in the larger role transition. Schlossberg et al. (2012) describe this role change as the *moving through* phase of transition where the individual must deal with challenges, find support as they need it, and group their new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. Further, role changes can be a situational factor in how individuals cope with transition (Schlossberg, 2008).

Under the umbrella of the mesosystem, Museus (2014) would interpret the idea of role change using the lens of cultural responsiveness. Museus (2014) suggests that it is the responsibility of the institution to assist students with this role change, which can be

accomplished through a holistically supportive environment. This would involve having one person during orientation, perhaps a student orientation leader, to be a model of role transition and a resource that students can go to for assistance with the shifting dynamics and role that they will experience.

Exosystem

Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the exosystem as the social systems linked to the individual, but in which he or she may not play an active part. When looking at the college environment, this may include friends of family, friends of friends, mass media, social media, and support services offered on campus. Ideally, the exosystem would embrace Museus's (2014) culturally responsive indicators of humanized education environments and proactive philosophies. When campus personnel are committed to the best interest of the students, the students will feel this and feel more connected to campus. While the students may not interact with each faculty or staff member on campus, they will still be linked to the overall educational environment, which may impact their transition. Further, if the exosystem includes proactive philosophies, where the institutional employees are going above and beyond to provide information, students will be more well-prepared and well-informed (Museus, 2014). Again, there may not be a direct connection between all students and all staff members, but proactively providing information will certainly impact the student experience, transition, and ultimate success. Orientation should be designed with a proactive approach in mind to ensure that students receive information intended to set them up for success in their first semester and beyond.

The exosystem also encompasses the second and third levels of social support under the Support factor in the 4 S System (Schlossberg, 2008). Schlossberg (2008) states that the second level of social support is comprised of those people and groups that are somewhat related to the role of the individual, including relatives outside the immediate family and neighborhood or school friends. These support systems may change over time due to changes in the role of the individual. The third level of social support that Schlossberg (2008) defines are those people that are directly related to a specific role of the individual, such as neighbors, co-workers, supervisors, and professors. The relationships and the level of support that they provide to the individual is the most likely to change overtime as the individual assumes different roles.

Outside of the relational piece of the exosystem, individuals are also still immersed in the *moving through* phase of transition, focused on creating balance between school, their microsystems, and these external relationships. It is important to keep in mind that while an individual's exosystem is transitioning, the microsystems and mesosystems may be changing as well.

Macrosystem

Simply put, the macrosystem is the world around the individual, including both physical setting and attitudes of the surrounding culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Schlossberg (1981) would also argue that the physical setting of the transition, in this case the orientation program, should be included in the macrosystem, as the environment of campus may impact and influence the individual and their transitional experience. She categorizes this as an environmental characteristic in her model of transition to

adaptation, noting that the physical setting can be an important piece of adapting to the transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

The concept of cultural relevance, which includes the relationship between a campus environment and student cultural backgrounds, can be situated within the macrosystem (Museus et al., 2017). Categories under the umbrella of cultural relevance are specifically related to the existent culture of campus, including cultural familiarity, culturally relevant knowledge, meaningful cross-cultural engagement, and culturally validating environments. For students from culturally diverse backgrounds, it is important to create a comfortable macrosystem where students feel understood and accepted while simultaneously having the opportunity to freely dialogue about their culture, their experiences, and their belief systems (Museus et al., 2017).

Schlossberg's (2008) Situation factor under the 4 S System falls squarely into the macrosystem as well. The Situation factor indicates that environmental factors such as what triggered the transition, timing of the transition, and the duration of the transition can affect how an individual experiences and copes with the transition (Schlossberg, 2008). It is important to note that the campus environment and environment of the town the campus is situated in may have a profound effect on a student's orientation experience, in turn impacting the entire transition process for better or worse.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem is the loftiest of all of the individual systems to understand, as it is the compilation of and encompasses all of the previous systems. The chronosystem consists of the events and transitions of the individual over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

To appreciate this in the context of orientation programming, the institution would need to consider the timeline and previous experiences of individuals that have led them to the institution at the time they enrolled. Further, it is important how previous experiences may affect their interaction with the orientation program. Museus (2014) emphasizes the importance of taking into account the previous experiences, cultural background, academic preparedness, and external influences of each student. If students feel understood and accepted, they will be more likely to successfully integrate to the campus community (Museus, 2014).

Ultimately, the chronosystem encompasses the passage of time. Schlossberg's (1981) model of human transition (figure 1) is part of the chronosystem, as the individual must undergo the process of transition to adaptation, which can be a lengthy process. Using Schlossberg's concept of Taking-Charge, the process of *moving in*, *moving through*, and *moving out* are all a piece of the chronosystem as they all involve changes overtime (Schlossberg et al., 2012). The cyclical fashion of the *moving out* stage being the end of a transition, as well as the beginning of the next transition, is a perfect example of the chronosystem in relation to the concept of time and change. For example, while orientation marks the conclusion of the transitional experience from their previous environment to the new institution, it also marks the beginning of their role transition to student.

Additional Considerations

The stress of transition can lead some students to feel discouraged and drop-out of college without giving themselves the chance to adjust (Robinson et al., 1996). This is

where orientation programs can become vital to student success, as they can act as a link between students and support services to assist in easing the transitional phase, as well as provide students with a foundation for college learning (Robinson et al., 1996). The scope of the transition stage will vary from one person to the next, however it is a stage that all students must endure to be incorporated into the college community. Providing students with information and addressing some common student concerns during an orientation experience can help students feel a bit more comfortable in their new surroundings and help with the transition phase (Robinson et al., 1996).

The process of integration and sense of belonging begins during orientation programs where students are introduced to one another, as well as faculty and staff members, and begin forming connections with their peers and college personnel prior to school starting. Orientation programs often break students into smaller peer groups led by upperclassmen to connect students with one another and foster a sense of belonging and connection to the institution (Mann et. al, 2010). It has been established that students who feel connected to other students and the campus community are more likely to persist to graduation (Astin, 1984). Orientation should be a community-building experience from which students should take away a sense of connection and commitment to the institution (Robinson et al., 1996).

For many, entering college is the first in a series of life changes, or transitions. Orientation programming is designed to introduce students to their new environment, allowing students to make connections with their peers and other members of the campus community, to begin planning their academic and professional pathways, and to establish

realistic expectations (Robinson et al., 1996). It simultaneously introduces students to and transitions them into their college experience. Successful orientation programs should assist students in understanding adaptability and problem-solving skills to make adaptations with change.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to conduct a Utilization-Focused program evaluation of the existing orientation program at the Steamboat Springs campus of Colorado Mountain College (CMC). The evaluation specifically focused on understanding student perceptions of their preparedness for college after completing the orientation program, as well as how their experiences might enhance the SOAR program. The evaluation sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are students' perceptions about their preparedness?
    a. In what ways do students feel orientation has prepared them for the academic aspects of college?
    b. In what ways do students feel that orientation has prepared them for the social aspects of college?
2. In what ways can student experiences enhance the SOAR program?

Location of the Study

CMC is a postsecondary institution, covering a district of 12,000 square miles through the Western Slope of Colorado. CMC offers both Associate and Bachelor degree

programs at 11 different campuses throughout the Rocky Mountains. Three of CMC's campuses are residential, providing a more traditional college experience, while the other eight campuses are commuter sites. CMC is an open enrollment institution, servicing traditional and non-traditional students with a wide array of pre-collegiate experience (Snapshot, 2018). Of students enrolled in credit courses college-wide, nearly 80% of students are from communities within the CMC district, 12% are from other parts of Colorado, and 8% are from out of state (Campus Portrait, 2017).

The Student Orientation and Registration (SOAR) program that was evaluated in this study is specific to the Steamboat Springs campus of CMC. Steamboat Springs is a resort community located in northwest Colorado where the ski and tourism industries drive the economy. The Steamboat campus is the northern most campus of CMC, located approximately two hours from CMC's district offices in Glenwood Springs. The degree programs offered at the Steamboat campus are driven by the local community and include Ski & Snowboard Business, Resort Management, Restaurant Management, Sustainability Studies, and Business Administration degrees. In the 2016-17 academic year, the Steamboat Springs campus enrolled 2,656 students, accounting for 16% of the total enrollment of the college and making Steamboat the largest residential CMC campus (Campus Portrait, 2017). The Steamboat campus services both traditional and non-traditional degree-seeking students, as well as members of the Steamboat community who are looking to take classes for pleasure. In 2016-17, 56% of students at the Steamboat campus were enrolled in credit classes (Campus Portrait, 2017). That same

year the Steamboat campus enrolled 68% of credit students from the CMC district, 17% from other areas of Colorado, and 15% from out of state (Campus Portrait, 2017).

Program Information

The SOAR program was designed to prepare students for their transition to college. SOAR was a two- or three-day, overnight experience in which new students participated in activities to get acquainted with the institution, their peers, staff members, and faculty. Students also received information about support services, met with an academic advisor, and registered for their fall semester classes. CMC Steamboat offered three SOAR sessions over the course of the year: sessions in June and August for the fall term and a session in January for the spring term. The participants in the SOAR program were mostly of traditional college-going age. All new students to CMC who lived on-campus and/or were under 21 years of age with less than 24 college credits were required to select one SOAR session to attend. Students were required to register and pay for SOAR at least two weeks prior to the event. A complete schedule for the 2018 June SOAR program can be seen in Appendix F.

The overarching goals of SOAR included preparing students to begin their semester and assisting them in having a general understanding of and connection to CMC. SOAR was geared towards facilitating a connection between students and their peers, staff, faculty, and place. The tangible items that students walked-away from SOAR with were a schedule of classes for the upcoming semester, a plan for payment, and their technology accounts set-up. Furthermore, after attending orientation, students should have had an understanding of what would be expected of them as students in the

classroom and as a member of the CMC community, familiarity with student life policies, knowledge of their degree program, and awareness of support services and resources on campus. Finally, the hope was that students also walked-away with a sense of community, a feeling of excitement, and connections to their peers, staff, and faculty.

Methodology

Evaluation Model

Due to the nature of focusing on one particular program, this study was a particularistic evaluation using Patton's (1978) Utilization-Focused Evaluation Theory (U-FE) to determine if SOAR fulfilled its intended goals. In looking at SOAR through an evaluative lens, this study worked to understand the dynamics of the program to make judgements about it (Merriam, 2001). In his theory, Patton emphasizes the evaluator must seek individual stakeholders who will be users of the evaluation (Christie & Alkin, 2013). Patton (1978) explains that the best way to obtain use is the "personal factor," meaning an evaluation is more likely to be utilized by identifying the people who have a stake in the program and who personally care about the findings of the evaluation. Additionally, to make U-FE work best, stakeholders must commit to utilization and the evaluator must engage the stakeholders every step of the way to foster buy-in to the findings and the use of the evaluation (Patton, 1978).

There are five major phases that must take place in a successful U-FE evaluation, the first of which is identifying stakeholders. The remaining phases are as follows: (2) develop with the users what the focus of the evaluation should be and how it will be utilized, (3) involve the stakeholders in methods, design, and measurement, (4) actively

engage the stakeholders in understanding the findings of the evaluation, and (5) making decisions on how to move forward (Christie & Alkin, 2013). Within these five phases, there are subcategories which must be accomplished. Additional information about the subcategories and a visual representation of U-FE can be viewed in Appendix G.

Patton's model worked seamlessly within the context of this study. SOAR involves many stakeholders at CMC, including personnel in both Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, as well as students and parents. It is essential this program works for everyone and accomplishes its intended goals. SOAR is one of the few programs on campus that involves and engages with every single department in some way. Since part of the focus of the evaluation of SOAR was to make recommendations to ensure SOAR is both academically and socially preparing students, it was crucial that this evaluation be useful, requiring stakeholder input and a commitment to use the evaluation. The more collaboration that took place between the evaluator and stakeholders who are invested in SOAR, the more successfully the recommendations will be implemented and used, therefore creating a better and more tailored experience for new CMC students.

Use of U-FE

The phases of Patton's (1978) U-FE model were kept in-focus each step of the way while framing the evaluation. The first, and arguably most important, phase of U-FE was to identify the primary user and stakeholders in the evaluation (Patton, 1978). The primary stakeholder of this evaluation was identified as a Student Affairs administrator at the Steamboat Springs campus, as the SOAR program falls under her supervisory. The additional stakeholders that made up the U-FE Committee were: two Enrollment Services

staff members, a Student Affairs College Counselor, an Assistant Dean of Instruction, and an Associate Professor. The stakeholders identified above were essential personnel to be included in the evaluation as they will ultimately be the users of the evaluation to improve the program.

Working with the primary stakeholder, the focus of the evaluation was determined, which is the second phase of U-FE (Patton, 1978). The primary stakeholder requested the evaluation focus specifically on two areas: if the SOAR program was preparing students to be successful in their first semester and what can be done to make the SOAR program more effective. The methods of how data would be gathered to execute the evaluation (outlined below) were also discussed. Patton (1978) advises that stakeholders should be involved in the design of the evaluation as the third phase of U-FE. The stakeholders agreed with and committed to the methods and focus that were designed with input from the primary stakeholder, which allowed the study to proceed without any major fundamental changes.

Participants

There were 160 students who participated in SOAR for the 2018 fall semester. Since all new students who were under the age of 21 and/or lived in the residence hall were required to attend SOAR, participants were generally traditional-aged college students between the ages of 18-21; 96.25% of participants in SOAR were in this age range. Of the 160 attendees, 127 students (79.38%) lived on campus for the academic year, 25 students (15.63%) lived locally with a parent or guardian, six (3.75%) were over 21 but chose to attend SOAR, and two students (1.25%) who were under 21 opted to live

off-campus and take classes part-time. Out of all SOAR participants, 107 (66.88%) identified as male and 53 (33.13%) identified as female (CMC, 2018).

SOAR participants hailed from 25 states, however approximately 75% of all participants were from Colorado. The participants were predominately Caucasian, with 135, or 84.38%, students self-identifying as white. This was followed by 18 students (11.25%) who identified as Hispanic, two students (1.25%) reported they were Native American, two students (1.25%) reported that their race and ethnicity was unknown, 2 students (1.25%) identified as Asian, and one student (0.63%) reported being of Hawaiian or Pacific Islander descent (CMC, 2018).

Sensitive populations

Of the 160 participants in SOAR, 26, or 16.25%, indicated on their admissions applications that they were academically disadvantaged and that they would like information about Disability Services (CMC, 2018). Students who utilized Disability Services were included in this evaluation and should be noted as a vulnerable population. An effort was made to make all materials provided for participants compliant with the American Disabilities Act (ADA). None of these students requested accommodations to participate in this research.

Exclusions

While SOAR is mandatory, there might have been a few students who were missed and managed to register for classes without attending. This study did not include any new student who did not attend a SOAR session, regardless of age. Additionally, this study excluded current students, as the evaluation was based on students who were new

to CMC for the 2018-19 academic year. This study did not consider personal life situations, including financial need, family situations, work status, and any unique circumstances. Finally, while parents were welcome to provide feedback on the event, their responses were excluded from this study as the goal of this evaluation was specific to the student experience.

Data Collection

All research took place on the Steamboat Springs campus of CMC. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to complete the program evaluation of SOAR. The following types of data were examined: (1) responses to close-ended polar, ranking, and forced choice questions from a questionnaire, (2) open-ended qualitative responses from a questionnaire, (3) quantitative institutional data from CMC's Institutional Research (IR) Department, and (4) qualitative data from the U-FE Committee. Table 1 below provides a summary of data collection and analysis methods in the study.

Table 1
Data Collection, Analysis, and Reporting Methods

Data Source	Data Collection	Data Analysis	Reporting Results
SOAR Questionnaire	Questionnaire administered to SOAR participants via Qualtrics, which contained close- and open-ended questions.	Results were exported into an Excel spreadsheet. Emerging topics were identified by the researcher and stakeholders. Through color and numerical coding techniques, this information was further narrowed into categories and sub-categories.	Descriptive statistics were used to describe participant responses to close-ended questions. Open-ended questions were categorized and described in a narrative form.
Institutional Data	Reports regarding retention, demographic, and student status of degree-seeking students were provided by CMC's Institutional Research Department.	The reports provided by IR were sorted and filtered based on students attending CMC in the 2018 fall and 2019 spring semesters. The data was analyzed to compare students who attended an orientation program with those who did not.	Descriptive statistics were used to illustrate the retention rate of students from the 2018 fall to 2019 semesters for both students who attended orientation and those who did not.
U-FE Committee Meetings	Field notes and/or recordings of each meeting with stakeholders were compiled and transcribed.	Field notes and transcriptions were coded and categorized using color and numerical coding techniques.	Once categorized, this data was reported in narrative format and used to support the results of the SOAR Questionnaire.

SOAR Questionnaire

A secondary data analysis of the questionnaire given to students at SOAR, as seen in Appendix H, was conducted to understand students' perceptions of their experiences. The questionnaire was administered on laptop computers via Qualtrics during the registration process at SOAR. This questionnaire included both close-ended and open-ended survey questions to gain a general understanding of the student experience prior to entering the classroom as a student. The close-ended questions included polar, ranking, and forced choice questions, which required students to answer simple yes or no questions, rank items by preference, and select options from a list. Based on student

responses to each closed question, open-ended questions were asked. The open-ended questions looked for student explanations of their feelings, opinions, and perceptions in relation to their experience during SOAR. The questionnaire was used to examine what the students experienced during SOAR and if they felt prepared to enter their first semester of college. Please see Appendix H for the full SOAR Questionnaire.

Institutional Data

To continue data collection, retention information from the fall 2018 to spring 2019 semesters was obtained to gain an understanding of retention rates at CMC Steamboat. CMC's Institutional Research Department (IR) pulled a report showcasing the retention information of degree-seeking students from the fall semester to the spring semester. The data sent by IR was anonymous so students could not be identified. The data sets included limited identifying information, such as major and developmental education enrollment. This data was used to determine statistical information surrounding second semester retention for students who attended SOAR compared with those who did not.

IRB approval from CMC was obtained to pull demographic information on new students who attended orientation at the Steamboat campus. This data was collected based on the names of the students that attended the orientation program, however all information was reported anonymously. This report included degree program, gender, self-reported racial and ethnicity information, student's home state, tuition classification, age, and housing status.

U-FE Committee Meetings

It was vital to the success of U-FE to include stakeholder input as part of the data collection. The U-FE Committee met 3 times and swapped multiple emails over the course of this study to analyze data and make recommendations regarding how to improve SOAR. The intention was that all U-FE Committee meetings would be recorded and transcribed as part of the data collection process for this study, which was done successfully for the second and third Committee meetings. The Committee experienced some technical difficulties in the first meeting; therefore, that meeting was not recorded. In lieu of a transcription for the first U-FE Committee meeting, detailed field notes were created and utilized as a source of data.

Data Analysis

Multiple analysis methods were employed to analyze the data, including both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Excel was heavily relied upon to organize the responses to the questionnaire. It is important to note that this data was collected as a survey of the SOAR event prior to beginning to this evaluation. Since the data already existed for the purposes of assessment, it was repurposed for this evaluation to specifically understand if the SOAR program is designed to prepare students for their studies at CMC.

SOAR Questionnaire

The SOAR Questionnaire was the main source of data in regards to student perceptions of preparedness. The questionnaire results were exported into an Excel spreadsheet for easy filtering and sorting, with each question residing in its own tab

within the workbook. A significant portion of the U-FE Committee Meetings were spent working with the SOAR Questionnaire data. The U-FE Committee members were provided Excel spreadsheets with participant responses to the open-ended questions. The U-FE Committee members worked in pairs on different questions to develop codes and categories for the open-ended responses using either numerical-coding, color-coding, or a combination of both to identify emerging topics regarding the student experience during SOAR. When sharing the emerging topics for each question, U-FE Committee members noted that various questions produced the same topics and codes, leading to the development of larger categories and development of findings. The input of the stakeholders was used to inform the coding process to best organize the responses from the students. This study specifically utilized deductive coding, since the stakeholders helped identified broader topics and categories they perceived to be in the data prior to coding.

To ensure the research questions were addressed, data analysis was split into three categories: (1) student perceptions about how orientation prepared them academically to be successful in their first semester at CMC, (2) student perceptions about how orientation prepared them socially to be successful in their first semester at CMC, and (3) program enhancement opportunities based on student experiences.

The close-ended questions on the questionnaire allowed for the use of descriptive statistics to generalize the student experience at SOAR by examining common responses. The open-ended questions focused on individual students' perceptions, feelings, and attitudes towards their level of preparedness to begin their academic and social

experiences at CMC, as well as how their reported experiences can improve the program for future participants. The coding of the data assisted in determining students' perceptions of their preparedness and the opportunities for improvement.

Institutional Data

Institutional data was used to determine retention rates from the 2018 fall to 2019 spring semester. The study employed the use of descriptive statistics to help explain patterns that emerged in regards to retention for students who attended SOAR compared with those who did not. While this information does not specifically address the students' perceptions of their level of preparedness, it will assist in validating student perceptions or unveiling a larger issue that may need to be addressed in a future study.

U-FE Committee Meetings

To incorporate the stakeholders in each phase of this study, the U-FE Committee meetings were either thoroughly documented or recorded and transcribed. The Committee meetings were structured around the data from the SOAR Questionnaire, leading to alignment between the codes used in the student data and the U-FE Committee. The field notes and transcriptions were coded and supported the findings that emerged in the student responses. U-FE data was used to triangulate and support the findings of this study.

Reporting Results

The data in this evaluation was described using narrative description and descriptive statistics. The narrative utilized rich and detailed description to examine the findings of the questionnaire via commonality between answers, common student

experiences, the broader categories identified by the U-FE Committee, and the findings that emerged in the data. Descriptive statistics were used to show which answers had the highest percentage of responses, thus being the most common perception among students of their experiences during orientation.

It was vital to the method of this study that stakeholders actively engaged in understanding the findings of the evaluation as the fourth phase of U-FE (Patton, 1978). This required explaining the coding scheme and asking the Committee to provide feedback and further insight based on the data. To ensure the stakeholders had access to the data, Power Point presentations were presented and hand-outs were provided to all U-FE Committee members. Stakeholders were also provided a copy of the written findings to either approve them or propose changes. The Committee voted to unanimously approve the findings that have been outlined in this study.

After the group engaged in a meaningful dialogical exchange about the findings of the research, they discussed what the SOAR program was doing well and what recommendations for improvement they wished to make. This accomplished the fifth phase of U-FE, which is for stakeholders to make decisions on how best to move forward (Patton, 1978). The decisions the U-FE Committee makes can then be implemented, thus creating effective change. After the evaluation was completed, a complete write-up of the process, findings, recommendations, and action items, entitled the Orientation Playbook, was created and provided to all stakeholders to ensure the group understands the process, next steps, and how to use the evaluation.

Validity

As part of the U-FE methodology, Patton (1999) suggests using triangulation to validate the findings in a qualitative program evaluation. Patton (1999) describes triangulation as the use of multiple data sources to explain findings and elicit a deeper understanding of those findings. Triangulation can also be understood as an attempt to more fully explain the complexity of a phenomenon by looking at it from multiple standpoints (Cohen & Manion, 2000). This study used multiple perspectives to uncover findings, including student responses to a questionnaire, reports from CMC's IR Department, and recordings of U-FE Committee meetings to triangulate the findings outlined below, thus creating validity and deeper meaning within the study.

Positionality of the Researcher

The evaluation of the SOAR program at the Steamboat Springs campus of CMC is not only valuable to the institution but will also be personably valuable to the researcher. The researcher has worked in the field of higher education admissions for nearly ten years, the last five of which have been at CMC running the admissions process and orientation program. As the Coordinator of Enrollment Services on campus, her job responsibilities include planning, directing, and executing SOAR. Additionally, her role in admissions allows access to the students and program information necessary to complete this study. As the director of SOAR, the researcher is heavily invested in the success of the program and preparing students for their time at CMC. While she believes SOAR is designed to prepare students for their studies at CMC, students have never actually been asked for their perspectives. It is important to comprehend students'

perceptions of their experience to ensure the SOAR program is designed to cater to their needs and provide the best possible experience.

Limitations of the Study

While the relationship of the researcher to the SOAR program will be an asset to this evaluation, it is also important to note it as a limitation. The researcher's involvement in the program makes it difficult to look at it as critically as someone who has no investment in the program. Furthermore, the relationship to the SOAR program gives the researcher a bias that the program is running well. The choice was made to focus on student perceptions specifically to try to remove the researcher and her bias from the data.

Another limitation to this study is the method of data collection utilized. All SOAR Questionnaires students submitted were anonymous. While this may have allowed collection of more honest information, it does not allow the stakeholders to ask any follow-up questions of specific students if something is unclear or they would like additional information. Many of the questions on the assessment surrounded student perceptions of preparedness, so it is important to note that students may have different definitions and understandings of preparedness. Additionally, since this data was self-reported by the students it is hard to verify and validate particular answers. Self-reported data may have led to biases on the questionnaire participant's end depending on what they experienced. Students may have had selective memory while completing the survey, meaning they only remembered one or two things about the event and based all of their answers off of that as opposed to their overall experience. Furthermore, it is possible that

students may have exaggerated or been untruthful in their answers based on extraneous factors such as their ability to get the classes they wanted or whether they had a positive or negative advising experience. Finally, students' feelings and perceptions may have changed over time, so it is important to note that the questionnaire results were specific to a moment in time. It was also important to consider that human emotion can change quickly and answers on each evaluation, whether positive or negative, reflected a student's feelings in one small window of the overall SOAR experience.

Additionally, it remains unknown whether the population of students that participated in SOAR would have been successful or not if they had not been required to attend SOAR. College-wide data of students at other campuses who were under 21 with less than 24 college credits could potentially be looked at to make some generalizations, however it would still be hard to bridge this gap of understanding as the campus culture of residential and commuter campuses differs.

It is important to note that this study has examined retention data between the first and second semesters of student attendance, yet the existent retention literature used in this study discussed first to second year retention rates. Exploring second semester retention as opposed to second year retention rates is a limitation due to the lack of research that has been completed surrounding second semester retention. Furthermore, while we can correlate orientation to retention or count it as one of many factors of retention, it cannot stand on its own as its own factor of retention, as there are too many events that take place between attending orientation and the start of the second semester.

One final limitation to this evaluation is in regards to the conceptual framework of the study. While Patton's U-FE is the best fit for this evaluation, it could be challenging to get all of the stakeholders to be invested in and committed to the evaluation. To this point, the stakeholders have been engaged and involved, however the execution of the recommendations may still prove challenging when the time comes to implement change.

Significance of the Study

The evaluation of the SOAR program at the Steamboat Springs campus of CMC was significant in determining whether or not students perceived the program prepared them for their first semester of college and to make recommendations to improve the program. Tinto (1988) and Museus (2014) both stress that the first six months of a student's experience in postsecondary education will determine whether they persist or drop-out. This is a concern for CMC, with only 51% of students retained from August 2015 to August 2016. Since lack of preparedness among students is one of the factors cited for college attrition (Rausch & Hamilton, 2006), the evaluation of the SOAR program sought to determine whether it prepared students both academically and socially for their first semester, as well as how student experiences could enhance the SOAR program in the future.

This study luminated student perceptions regarding their level of preparedness to enter CMC after attending SOAR. The evaluation examined the experience that offered new students at CMC from their perspectives and informed the U-FE Committee's decisions regarding how to move forward with future planning and execution of

orientation. The ultimate goal of the evaluation was to best serve and prepare students for their time at CMC, while hopefully assisting with increasing student retention.

Professional Contributions

This evaluation can have a lasting impact for CMC. The goal of the evaluation was to improve the SOAR program. The analysis of the data and recommendations provided from the U-FE Committee determined if we met the students' needs during SOAR and how it can be improved. If the evaluation is implemented and utilized, students may be more prepared both academically and socially to begin their studies at CMC, thereby potentially increasing retention rates from the first semester to the second semester of study. Hopefully, this could contribute to student persistence and higher graduation rates for the institution.

While this study was only conducted at the Steamboat campus, the findings of the evaluation could have a larger reach to the other 10 CMC campuses. Out of the 11 CMC campuses, the three residential campuses require new student attendance at orientation and three of the commuter sites offer an optional orientation program for students. This is an obvious inconsistency, leading to conflicting messages as we are all one college but have different practices surrounding orientation. Based on the findings of the evaluation, recommendations about orientation programming may be able to be applied collegewide. Applying the evaluation to other CMC campuses may lead to increased collegewide retention rates and better prepared students across the college.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The Program

Student Orientation and Registration (SOAR) is the orientation program hosted by the Steamboat Springs campus of Colorado Mountain College (CMC). The SOAR program is offered twice a summer and lasts for two to three days, depending on which orientation students choose to attend. SOAR is mandatory for all new students who are living on campus and/or are under 21 years old with less than 24 college credits already completed. The SOAR program is designed to prepare students for their first semester at CMC. Detailed information about the SOAR program can be found in Appendix F.

Purpose of the Study

While SOAR is designed to prepare students to enter college, the purpose of this study was to determine student perceptions of how orientation prepared them for their first semester at CMC, both academically and socially. The study was designed as a program evaluation using the Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) method to make recommendations to enhance and improve SOAR and thereby improve student perceptions of their preparation. This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions about their preparedness?
    a. In what ways do students feel orientation has prepared them for the academic aspects of college?
    b. In what ways do students feel that orientation has prepared them for the social aspects of college?
2. In what ways can student experiences enhance the SOAR program?

Data Collection

Data was collected in three ways. Participants of the SOAR program were given the opportunity to respond to a questionnaire to share their perceptions of the SOAR program. Furthermore, institutional data was collected to learn general information about the population of students who attended SOAR and retention data of students from the fall to spring semesters. Finally, U-FE Committee meetings that were conducted as part of this study were recorded and used as data.

Questionnaire

Each student who attended SOAR was given the opportunity to complete the SOAR Questionnaire near the end of the event. The SOAR Questionnaire was built in Qualtrics and was distributed on laptop computers in the lobby area of the Academic Center. Most students completed the survey after they were done registering for classes while they were waiting to complete financial aid and payment. Out of the 160 students who attended SOAR, 152 completed the questionnaire, which equates to a 95% response rate. The responses were recorded in Qualtrics and then downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet.

Initially, the results from the entire questionnaire were recorded on one Excel sheet. Responses were separated by question with each question copied onto its own sheet within the same workbook. Within each sheet, descriptive statistics or a coding system were used to identify emerging categories in the qualitative data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses to close-ended questions from the SOAR Questionnaire to best describe the results. Coding systems were created and used to categorize the responses to open-ended questions in the SOAR Questionnaire. Categories were created for each question or group of questions by finding commonalities in the experiences of participants as they describe in their responses.

Institutional data

Data regarding the population of SOAR participants was obtained from Informer, CMC's data reporting system. The list of students who participated in SOAR was compared to the larger list of all applicants to the 2018 fall semester to determine demographic information about the students. Institutional Research (IR) was called-upon to pull retention data for students to look at students who attended in the 2018 fall semester and returned for the 2019 spring semester. This data was used to look at the retention rates of students who attend orientation compared with those who do not.

U-FE Committee

Finally, a large part of the methodology of this study was the Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) model in which stakeholders play an important role in the findings of the study and recommendations for next steps. As such, a U-FE Committee was convened that consisted of stakeholders from both the Student Affairs and Academic

Affairs departments on the Steamboat Springs campus. The Committee was comprised of one Student Affairs administrator, two Enrollment Services staff members, a College Counselor, an Assistant Dean of Instruction, and a faculty member. There were three U-FE Committee meetings held in which stakeholders discussed the results of the responses to the SOAR Questionnaire, identified common topics that they wanted to address, and discussed possible improvements to the SOAR program.

These meetings were held on: (1) December 6, 2018, (2) February 25, 2019, and (3) March 20, 2019. The February and March meetings were both recorded and transcribed. The December meeting was not recorded due to some technical difficulties, but detailed field notes were documented. The field notes and transcriptions were coded and categorized into common topics.

Findings

While analyzing and coding the SOAR Questionnaire and U-FE Committee documents, a pattern of findings began to emerge. The findings fell into four larger categories, which were (1) combined preparedness, (2) academic preparedness, (3) social preparedness, and (4) program enhancements. Combined preparedness specifically focuses on the finding of retention. The finding of academic planning fell under the academic preparedness category. Under the category of social preparedness, the findings revolve around interaction with people and interaction with place. Finally, the category of program enhancement, encapsulated the findings of information overload for students and enhancement opportunities. This chapter is written to outline the pattern of findings

that emerged. Each broader category is briefly discussed, followed by the findings that were found within the broader topic.

Combined Preparedness

> *"I feel very prepared. I got to know more about the staff, advisors, and the environment at CMC. Finishing my schedule has me more confident about the semester."*
>
> *-SOAR Participant*

Combined preparedness focuses on the overall preparedness of a student to enter college. This includes students being prepared academically to take college-level coursework, students to learn and navigate the processes of attending college, and students transitioning into and connecting with their new institution, peers, faculty, and staff (College Preparation, 2006). Retention is a finding that emerged from this study under the larger category of combined preparedness, as both academic and social factors impact retention.

Finding 1: Retention

> *"We're all thinking about retention at this point because our numbers are not going up… [we] have numbers that show that retention is…correlated with [orientation]."*
>
> *– Faculty member on U-FE Committee*

Colleges and universities must quickly work towards establishing connections with incoming students, as the likelihood of a student leaving an institution is highest in the first year of college, particularly within the first six weeks of the first semester (Tinto,

1988). As previous studies conducted about orientation suggest, students are more likely to engage with a higher education institution, and therefore more likely to persist as a student at that institution, when they have attended an orientation program (Astin, 1984; Deggs et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2002). This appears to be true at Colorado Mountain College as well.

Table 2
Retention Data for New, Degree-Seeking Students from 2018 Fall to 2019 Spring at all CMC campuses

Campus Type	2018 Fall	2019 Spring	Retention Rate
Commuter campuses	412	240	58.25%
Residential campuses	521	352	67.56%
Campuses with orientation	827	557	67.35%
Campuses without orientation	106	35	33.02%

Note: Data does not include students with the home location of online learning.

The national data and literature surrounding retention is predominately focused on second year enrollment. Due to the nature and timeframe of this study, as well as the data that CMC's Institutional Research Department was able to provide, second semester enrollment from the fall to spring semesters was examined college-wide. The data outlined in Table 2 illustrates the fall to spring retention rates for students who were new to CMC for the 2018 fall semester and is categorized by campus type. There was a total of 412 new students for the 2018 fall semester at the commuter sites of CMC, which include the Aspen, Breckenridge, Buena Vista, Carbondale, Dillon, Glenwood Center, Rifle, and Vail Valley campuses. Of those 412 new students, 240 retained for the 2019 spring semester, which is a retention rate of 58.25%. On the other hand, the residential campuses of CMC, which include Leadville, Spring Valley, and Steamboat Springs, had

a higher retention rate of 67.56%. There was a total of 521 new students at the residential campuses for the 2018 fall semester and 352 of them retained to spring.

Of particular importance are the differences in retention rates between campuses that offered orientation programming for the 2018 fall semester and those who did not. The campuses that offered orientation were Breckenridge, Leadville, Rifle, Spring Valley, Steamboat Springs, and Vail Valley. Those campuses totaled 827 new degree-seeking students for the 2018 fall semester, 557 of which retained to the 2019 spring semester, which is a retention rate of 67.35%. The remainder of the commuter sites did not offer any type of orientation programming. Together, those campuses enrolled 106 new degree-seeking students for the 2018 fall semester. Only 35 of those students returned to CMC for the spring semester, which led to a retention rate of 33.02%. The higher retention rate of students who attended campuses that offer orientation suggests that orientation programming may impact a student's likelihood to retain at CMC from the fall to spring terms.

Table 3
Retention Data for Degree-Seeking Students from 2018 Fall to 2019 Spring at CMC Steamboat Springs

Student Type	2018 Fall	2019 Spring	Retention Rate
Overall population	599	432	72.12%
All New Students	197	142	72.08%
New Students; SOAR attendees	149	113	75.84%
New students; non-SOAR	54	29	53.70%

Note: Data does not include the 11 SOAR attendees that did not enroll in the fall semester; SOAR data includes 6 students that were not new to CMC but were new to the Steamboat Springs campus.

The relationship between orientation and retention at CMC can be further exemplified by specifically looking at how many students retained at CMC Steamboat

from the 2018 fall to the 2019 spring semesters. A break-down of the numerical data can be found in Table 3 above. A report provided by the CMC IR Department indicated there was a total of 599 degree-seeking students enrolled at the Steamboat Springs campus of CMC for the 2018 fall semester. The campus retained 432 of these students for the 2019 spring semester, making the percentage of overall degree-seeking students that stayed at the Steamboat campus for the full academic year 72.12%.

The data can be narrowed to look specifically at new students that retained from fall to spring. There was a total of 197 new students for the fall semester, including both students that participated in orientation and those that did not. Of these 197 students, 142 returned for the spring semester, making the retention rate of first-year, degree-seeking students 72.08%. This closely mirrors the overall degree-seeking population on campus. The data for retention among CMC Steamboat students from fall to spring can be viewed in Table 3.

This data also specifically looked at new students who attended orientation at the Steamboat Springs campus compared to those that did not for the fall 2018 semester. Of the original 160 SOAR participants only 149 actually ended-up enrolling in the fall semester, which is a melt rate (a term used to describe students who commit to an institution but do not actually attend) of 6.87%. The 11 students that did not enroll in the fall semester choose not to attend for personal or financial reasons, or were not permitted to attend based on drug and alcohol related offenses during orientation. It is also important to note that six students who attended SOAR came to the Steamboat campus from elsewhere in the CMC district and are therefore not counted in the overall new

student data. From the group of 149 orientation students that actually attended CMC, 113 retained from the fall to spring semester, which is a retention rate of 75.84%. This is on par with the annual national average. The remaining 54 new students in the fall semester were not required to attend orientation because they were either over 21 years old or transferred 24 credits to CMC. From this population, 29 enrolled in the 2019 spring term, leading to a retention rate of 53.7% for non-SOAR students.

While there is a plethora of reasons which lead to student retention, including academic and social factors, the data presented here suggests there may be a link between attending an orientation program and CMC and retention, specifically attending the SOAR and retaining enrollment at the Steamboat Springs campus of CMC. We cannot definitively say that orientation is the reason why these students stayed at CMC; however, we can see that it may be one of many influences of retention as the rate of retention for students who attended SOAR at the Steamboat Springs campus was 22.14% higher than those who did not. This suggests that SOAR may be helpful in preparing students for their first semester at CMC, perhaps making them more likely to stay for the second semester.

Academic Preparedness

> *"I feel very prepared especially after the final class registration because everything feels very set up and well established."*
>
> *- SOAR Participant*

Academic preparedness encompasses various areas of preparedness, including English and math readiness and what the post-secondary institution has done

academically to prepare students to enter college. The most recent CMC Campus Portrait (2017) indicated that 60% of students at the Steamboat Springs campus were not college-ready and needed to enroll in a remedial math or English class. This is slightly less than the national average of 63% of college students entering a 2-year college needing to take at least one developmental education class (CollegeBoard, 2011). Of the 149 SOAR attendees that enrolled in the 2018 fall semester, 73, or 48.99%, were enrolled in a developmental education course during their first semester.

The stakeholders on the U-FE committee were surprised by the level of academic underpreparedness at CMC. The academic preparedness of a student prior to attending CMC is out of the control of the institution; however, it is the institution's responsibility to ensure students feel prepared to begin their first semester. CMC can help students feel academically prepared through academic planning. While the numbers show students are not entering CMC at college level, the data suggests students are staying to continue their education. The finding under this category specifically addressed the research question: In what ways do students feel orientation has prepared them for the academic aspects of college?

Finding 2: Academic Planning

"[Planning] helped me decide the way I would like to go about obtaining my degree."

– SOAR Participant

Under the umbrella of academic preparedness, academic planning is something students indicated would help them feel more prepared for their first semester. For the

purposes of this study, academic preparedness included class registration, advising, degree program information, placement testing and web account set-up. Student participants indicated that academic planning assisted in their preparedness because it allowed them to have an understanding of what was going to be expected of them academically and set the expectation of what their first semester would be like. One participant said, “I now have a good idea of what my fall semester is going to look like, and I'm feeling more confident.” Another concluded that the rotating topics especially assisted in feeling prepared, stating “I really enjoyed the session on day two when we learned about signing up for classes, text books, transportation, etc. They explained everything so well and I really felt like I understood the materials they were giving us.”

Registration

Registering for classes for the fall semester was the most important activity that students participated in according to responses to the SOAR Questionnaire. Out of the 152 responses to the questionnaire, 51 students, or 33.55%, ranked registration as the most important activity; it was ranked the second most important activity by an additional 27 students, or 17.76%. No one on the U-FE Committee was surprised that the highest number of students ranked registration as most important. The U-FE Committee unanimously agreed that they had expected this response.

Students indicated an array of reasons behind why they selected registration as the most important activity, the most common reason being that it would prepare them for what to expect during their first year at CMC. One participant stated that registration was most important, “To see what classes I will be taking, and to know that I am set for this

upcoming school year." Another participant echoed this by saying, "I enjoyed picking my schedule because it made it easy to see what the rest of the year is going to be like for me."

Several student participants additionally stressed the importance of ensuring they were taking the correct classes for their degree program, with 17 responses specifically referencing the importance of taking only the necessary coursework. This indicates that students want to make sure they are not wasting time or money. For example, one participant proclaimed, "[Registration] was most important because I want to make sure that I'm taking everything that I need to and nothing that I don't." Another participant stated, "I plan on transferring after this year and I want to get the important classes out of the way now while they're cheap." An additional participant declared the importance of "making sure every class is worth [the] time and is interesting…[are] crucial to not fail and waste a ton of money."

Another common topic that came up in regards to registration is that students wanted to take classes that were interesting and enjoyable. The data suggests student participants generally believed that they would be more successful if they were engaged in their classes. One participant specified, "I tend to put my education first. I wanted to take classes that I found interesting and worked around my schedule." Another participant explained that registration was important, "To make sure I enjoy the classes I will be taking in order to get my degree."

Generally speaking, this data suggests students felt that registration was a factor in feeling prepared to enter their first semester at CMC, specifically addressing the

research question about students' perspectives of how the SOAR program academically prepared students for their first semester at CMC.

Advising

Students indicated that advising played a critical role in their academic planning and level of preparation during orientation. A member of the U-FE Committee stated, "[Students] want more focus on their degree program…they just want to know more about what processes they need, what processes are recommended, [and] what are required."

Students generally felt their advisors were helpful and provided great guidance. One participant summarized, "[My advisor] helped guide me on a path to success and made me feel confident about my degree choice." Another participant pointed out, "[My advisor] was the one who made everything happen for me, help[ed] me through getting classes and understanding what I had to do to make the semester go great."

Other student participants noted they appreciated their advising time and advisors as resources for success. A participant who indicated that meeting with his or her advisor was the most important activity during SOAR did so because, "They will be my first resource for any conflicts regarding my academics. I am here for a quality education and that is why this [was] the most important part for me." Another participant indicated that his or her advisor "helped me understand why I was here and why I'm supposed to be here," allowing the student to feel validated in the decision to attend CMC. An added perspective indicated that advising was the most important activity to a participant

because, "…they will show [me] what I need to be successful and how to achieve my goals."

Students who participated in one-on-one advising generally felt more prepared than those who participated in group advising. A student who had one-on-one advising stated, "There was nothing advising or question wise that could have been done to make me feel more prepared to begin college, everything was very smooth and well planned out." On the other hand, a student who received group advising stated that he or she felt "somewhat prepared. [B]ecause the advising section wasn't a 1 on 1 deal, I feel shaky and unconfident about my schedule and career at CMC." This data suggests that academic advising played a role in students' perceptions of their academic preparedness.

Future success

Another area students cited as essential to academic planning was planning for future success. Students were eager to complete academic planning, including registration and advising, to help prepare them for their future – the first semester and beyond. Ten students addressed preparation for their future in their responses to the SOAR Questionnaire, believing that academic planning would "automatically set [them] up to be successful in the future." One participant with sights set on the shorter term said that academic planning was important, "So I can finish up my degree."

Other students indicated that academic planning was key to their loftier, long-term goals. A participant in this mindset stated, "Registering for classes was the most important because it has a lot to do with my future plans and goals." Another participant indicated that it was essential to "get the classes that are going to help me pursue my

dream.” An additional participant explained that registration and academic planning was important because, “I want to succeed in my life, and have a good career that makes me happy and by registering for the correct classes I can achieve that more easily.”

Student nervousness

While some students indicated academic planning was important, other expressed nerves surrounding this topic moving into the first semester. In the first U-FE Committee meeting, a faculty member stated that while ‘nervous’ and ‘anxious’ seem like negative experiences for students, it is actually healthy to be a little nervous or anxious about something you care about. Students who indicated they had some nerves surrounding their academic preparation did so because they were nervous about their schedule. One participant said, “[I feel] pretty prepared, welcome and comfortable with the environments but do not know what to expect from classes.” Another participant indicated, “I feel fairly prepared, I am worried about some of my classes. My Wednesdays are slammed, but I think I am ready.”

Academic performance was an area that made these students feel nervous as well. A participant explained, “I still am a bit nervous [about] my first semester, but I am more prepared for what I am going to do. There are aspects that make me nervous such as the more studying time and being unable to drop below a certain academic level.” An Engineering student bluntly stated, “I'm nervous and worried that I will fail all my academic classes and not be able to become an engineer.”

This data suggests that academic planning helped the majority of participants feel academically prepared for their first semester at CMC, yet some participants still felt

nervous to begin the semester. These students equated feelings of nervousness and anxiety with not feeling fully prepared.

Social Preparedness

> *"I feel prepared to take on college, my only hope is that I make a lot of friends and create a healthy balance between school, work, social life, and personal goals throughout my year."*
>
> *-SOAR Participant*

Social preparedness is essential to the transition of the students into CMC, as indicated in the next two findings. Social preparedness includes navigating the college process, feeling a sense of connection to the institution, and creating social structures and ecosystems that students will operate within during their collegiate experience. These ecosystems and connections can begin during orientation, as students are given the opportunity to meet peers, faculty, and staff. Orientation also allows students to get a sense of the campus community and the town they will be living in. The findings in this category specifically address the research question: In what ways do students feel that orientation has prepared them for the social aspects of college?

Finding 3: Interaction with People

> *"From everything I have learned I am excited to meet all of the amazing people this CMC has and I can't wait for all of the activities offered in this town and through the school. Everyone I met was really nice and I feel I have learned a lot that makes going to CMC easier and it will help me be more successful."* *-SOAR Participant*

Student participants indicated relationships with peers, faculty, and staff were an essential part of their orientation experience. Based on student responses to the SOAR Questionnaire, connecting with their peers and connecting with their academic advisor were two of the top three most important activities during SOAR. Out of all participants in the SOAR Questionnaire, 57, or 37.5%, indicated that connecting with a peer, faculty member, or staff member was the most important activity during orientation. Beyond that, 76 student participants, or 50%, indicated that some form of interpersonal interaction was their favorite activity during SOAR.

Student perceptions across the board indicated that connecting with their peers, faculty, and staff helped them feel prepared for their first semester at CMC. One participant summarized the feelings of preparedness by stating, “I am more prepared than I ever could have thought because I have had so much help from advisors and I got to get to know the town, the people, and the lifestyle a lot better.” Another participant described the connection to students and staff as the reason for feeling most prepared: “I feel very prepared and ready to start the school year. I feel closer to the students and the staff.”

Connections with faculty and staff are key to student social preparedness. One participant explained, “I feel very prepared and very welcome to attend CMC. The faculty is kind, and makes sure things run smoothly. Throughout SOAR I also learned a lot more about CMC, and all it has to offer.” Another response indicated, “I feel very prepared. I received the help I needed and the questions I had were answered. I feel that the staff was very helpful throughout the entire process. I am very comfortable with attending CMC in the fall.”

Welcoming attitude

Generally speaking, students felt very welcomed to campus by the people, including both staff and other students. When asked to select three words to describe their SOAR experience, 92 participants, or 60.53%, selected the word ‘welcoming’, making it the number one word used to describe orientation. Students felt the people at SOAR created a welcoming environment to aid in their transition to CMC. Students who described their experience as ‘welcoming’ did so because they felt people welcomed them to campus with open arms, provided opportunities to forge connections with others, and provided a level of support and help. One participant said: “…I chose ‘welcoming’ because it was what stood out the most. The staff, the kids, the town, they were all so friendly and welcoming.” Another participant stated: “I felt welcomed [in] the way everyone talked to me and approached me.”

The U-FE Committee was elated that the top word that students used to describe their SOAR experience was welcoming. Everyone in the room felt that this was a direct reflection on the work that they do at CMC and their interactions with students. No one on the Committee was surprised that students felt welcomed; as an administrator on the U-FE Committee noted, “We strive to go above and beyond to make our students feel comfortable”

Connection with peers

The Student Affairs personnel on the U-FE Committee had predicted students would value connecting with their peers highly and were in agreement that they should. When the U-FE Committee split into pairs to look at responses to various questions from

the SOAR Questionnaire, the Committee came to a consensus that meeting and connecting with people was one of the most important things that students do at SOAR to help them feel prepared for their first semester, while, at the same time, students want *more* connection and interaction with people. The group noted it was interesting that students thought the orientation program did well connecting them with people, but was also what the students want more of and want us to improve.

Common reasons students gave for why they considered connection with people as most important include the sense of community it created among their peers and the opportunity to meet new people and make friends. Students felt that it was important to their experience to forge these relationships during orientation to help them feel prepared to return in the fall. One participant described making connections with his or her peers as most important because, "… your peers are the ones you will study with, have classes with, and hang out with while you are here [at CMC]."

'Making friends' was the most common reason given for why connection was so important to them, with 33, or 57.89%, of the 57 student participants who selected connecting with a peer, faculty or staff member listing this as the reason. Many students indicated having friends was extremely important to them and would help them be successful at CMC. Student responses in this area communicate an unwritten expectation that making friends and having a supportive community will be part of their college experience. A participant stated this was most important "because that's a big part of the college experience, getting to know new people and making sure you feel comfortable in your new location." Another participant indicated that, "Having supportive peers makes

the college experience. People who can make you laugh and be there for you in a new place."

Peer connections seem to be a central idea to social preparedness. One participant summarized this sentiment best by saying, "I want my experience here [at CMC] to be a good one and for me to do that I need to have positive relationships with my peers to ensure my success socially and academically. For me it is far easier to enjoy the process of learning when I feel happy in the place that I am and with the people I'm around." Another participant specifically indicated how SOAR helped in the process of making friends, stating, "I was worried about making friends so this helped me to feel more confident about coming here."

Connection with faculty and staff

Connections with faculty and staff were also noted as key to student social preparedness. One participant explained, "I feel very prepared and very welcome to attend CMC. The faculty is kind, and makes sure things run smoothly. Throughout SOAR I also learned a lot more about CMC, and all it has to offer." Another response indicated, "I feel very prepared. I received the help I needed and the questions I had were answered. I feel that the staff was very helpful throughout the entire process. I am very comfortable with attending CMC in the fall."

Student participants found the faculty and staff to be an important source of support for them and a resource to ask questions to and garner information from. SOAR participants also frequently indicated that faculty and staff were friendly, welcoming, and helpful. Students who indicated their relationships with faculty and staff were most

important did so because they believed these people would be their support system and would help them navigate their college experience. One participant noted the staff treated the students as equals, stating, “All of the staff welcomed us with open arms, let us know that we were all on the same level, and gave us information in a way that our nervous brains could comprehend.” Another participant said, “[Faculty] are such an important resource, it is important to develop a working relationship with them. They are full of so many resources and advice,” to describe the importance of the faculty-student relationship.

Students also described the connection with faculty and staff as essential because it made them feel comfortable and confident moving into their first semester. One participant recounted the experience by saying, “The first day of SOAR the faculty was welcoming, and made you realize you made the right decision to come to CMC. The faculty also followed up with [a] very valuable presentation that prepared you for college, and all it entails.” Another participant noted that, “The staff was inviting and friendly and provided enough information for me to feel confident about my time at CMC.”

The members of the U-FE Committee from Academic Affairs, were surprised by the fact that connecting with an academic advisor was ranked so highly by students. They both expressed that they do not believe that faculty advisors understand the impact that they have on the student experience. The faculty member continued by correlating the connection with faculty to retention, saying, “…watching us do our faculty introduction each semester, I think there's a retention piece there…I would want to see us preserve that, I think no other institution does anything like this.”

The data provided by students in this finding suggests the people students meet and connect with during orientation are essential to the social preparedness. Furthermore, this data suggests that if students have friends and feel connected and supported by peers, faculty, and staff, they may be better situated to do well academically and be more successful as a student.

Finding 4: Interaction with Place

"I feel very prepared because…I feel comfortable with the environment around me."

– SOAR Participant

Another commonality among students who attended SOAR feeling prepared to become students at CMC was in reference to the environments of the campus and the town of Steamboat Springs. This finding helps answer the research question about students' perceptions of their social preparedness to enter their first semester of college. Student perceptions of the environmental impact on their social preparedness included the campus environment, the environment of Steamboat Springs, and being away from home.

Of all 152 respondents to the SOAR Questionnaire, 21 or 13.82%, described their interaction with place during orientation as impacting their level of preparedness for the fall semester. Students felt that attending orientation prior to the start of the semester gave them the opportunity to learn their way around campus, understand the atmosphere, and experience and become comfortable with the environment. After attending SOAR,

one participant explained, “[I feel] much more prepared than I was before. It's nice to at least know the basic look and function of where I will be living for the next two years.”

Multiple student participants acknowledged that SOAR allowed them to feel comfortable with their new environment, which helped them feel prepared to enter CMC. Students described learning their way around campus, knowing where resources were located, and having a better idea of what to expect from the atmosphere as reasons that allowed them to feel comfortable. Students further indicated that experiencing the campus environment was extremely valuable during the orientation experience to help them prepare for the fall semester. Fifty responses to the SOAR Questionnaire, or 32.89%, contained information regarding students getting to know the campus, many of which linked this familiarity to feeling comfortable and confident in the campus environment. Participants used statements such as, “got a great feel for campus” and “got to know CMC” to help describe their experience.

Physical setting

Many of those 50 responses indicated that students believed it was important they experience the campus environment during orientation. Learning where things were located on campus was an important factor to students feeling prepared for their first semester. One participant noted, “[I feel] completely ready. I know where everything on campus is, I love the staff, [and] I know where the food is.” Another indicated, “I feel confident and familiar with classes and rooms. I also think it gave a good chance to look at the town.” Participants expressed excitement for learning where everything was

located on campus, allowing them to "feel more comfortable…coming to [a] new school."

On the other hand, students who did not feel comfortable with the layout of campus seemed to feel underprepared for the semester, noting that not knowing where their classes would be made them nervous. Once participant responded, "I'm feeling a 9 out of 10 because I know almost everything I need to know except for where my classes are," when asked how prepared he or she felt to enter CMC. Another noted, "I feel very prepared, only thing I'm not prepared for is navigating where my classes are."

Experiencing the social aspects of the location during SOAR seemed essential to social preparedness and student life. The residence and dining halls were often singled-out in the data as contributing to the student experience and level of comfort students felt. An administrator on the U-FE Committee commented that in her experience, "[Students] definitely like to hear about residence hall [and] food service." The students who were planning to live on campus for the 2018-19 academic year and stayed on campus during orientation were the participants who felt the strongest about staying on campus during SOAR preparing them for the semester. This subset of students felt that getting to sample life in the residence hall and tasting the food in the dining hall facilitated their expectations and preparedness. When asked what the best part of SOAR was, one participant explained, "I like staying in the dorms to get a feel of what it will be like to live there for the school year." Furthermore, out of the 30 students that indicated that they would be living off-campus, nearly 17% listed "the food" as their favorite part of SOAR.

Atmosphere

The atmosphere of CMC was an important factor of preparedness for many students. A dozen students indicated the feeling they got from the campus environment led them to feel prepared for the semester. One participant indicated the atmosphere made him or her feel, "like I belonged here in the culture." The U-FE Committee thought that it was very important to note that the SOAR program is the students' introduction to CMC and that initial impression of the campus culture is extremely important.

Students felt the atmosphere of campus was very positive and welcoming. Overall, 57 students, or 37.50% of all participants, used the word positive to describe their SOAR experience, 15 specifically relating their experience to the atmosphere, environment, or attitudes of campus. Simply put, this group of students felt that their orientation experience was improved by the "positive people and place." One student stated, "When I entered into the auditorium, I felt a very positive aura fill the room." This suggests creating a positive atmosphere during orientation leads students to feel more prepared and comfortable.

Home

While students generally felt positive on campus, some students who were moving to CMC from out of town expressed some nerves about being in a new environment. Of all 160 SOAR participants, 80 students, or 50%, were from out of the CMC district or service area. Looking closer, 58 of these students were from Colorado, making up 36.25% of the total population. Forty of these students, or 25% of the total population, were from out of state. These students hailed from 22 states from various

regions across the country. Eight of these students expressed direct nerves about living far away from home. One participant from New York said, “I experienced a lot of anxiety when faced with the task of packing up my life and moving to a brand-new town where I knew absolutely no one.” Another participant indicated, “I am worried about getting homesick and missing my mother.” This suggests that it may be helpful for orientation programming to address and alleviate some of these fears for students to help them feel more socially prepared.

Conversely, some students felt right at home by the end of SOAR. The idea of making CMC home repeatedly came up in the data. One participant correlated feeling at home directly to preparation, stating, “I feel very prepared to come back in the Fall and make CMC my home.” Another participant concurred with this sentiment by stating, “I hope [to] really make sure I feel at home, which I’m already getting that feeling.” Generally speaking, students felt, “prepared, welcome and comfortable” with the idea of CMC as their home.

Program Enhancements

> ***“****We've seen the data [and] did a little bit more deep diving into the improvement pieces of the data…based on what the students are saying we can improve orientation to meet their needs for preparation.”*
>
> *-Enrollment Services staff member on U-FE Committee*

To address the research question ‘In what ways can student experiences enhance the SOAR program?’, data provided by students regarding improvements to their

experience must be considered. While students generally enjoyed the SOAR program, many students offered insight and input for enhancement based on their experiences. Student data included that SOAR contained an overwhelming amount of information and an abundance of suggestions for how CMC can enhance the SOAR program.

Finding 5: Information Overload

"Less info [at] one time, less stress." *-SOAR Participant*

The most common feedback for improvement students provided through their responses to the SOAR Questionnaire was that too much information was crammed into SOAR, leading them to feel overwhelmed. When asked to select the three words that best described their experience during SOAR, 23 students, or 15.13%, chose the word 'overwhelming'. Student descriptions of why they felt overwhelmed included there was too much information to take in, they felt uncertain, and they were frustrated with processes. This information helps answer the research question regarding how student experiences can enhance the SOAR program.

The SOAR program was designed to provide the information and tools for students to be successful at CMC, which encompasses many topics. While a large number of students indicated the information provided was helpful in allowing them to feel more prepared, other students found the volume of information given during SOAR was excessive and left them overwhelmed.

Thirty-five students, or 23.03%, specifically indicated the information provided during orientation allowed them to feel prepared for their first semester. On the contrary, 18 students, or 11.84%, specifically noted they did not feel prepared because they

received too much information during SOAR. The most common types of responses included statements such as, “there was way too much information to remember” and “there is a lot of information to digest.” One participant explained, “The information provided was valuable, but a lot to take in. It made me nervous about the year.” Another participant noted that “a lot of new information was being thrown at me at once and it was difficult to all take in at once.”

Students also indicated they would have liked some further clarity and for the pace of SOAR to slow down a bit. One participant noted, “I feel like a lot of information was thrown at me at once and if I would have been given less at a time, I would have not felt so overwhelmed.” Another participant communicated that they wished that SOAR was “Just a bit more organized…It just felt rushed.” A respondent echoed this thought by saying, “I felt like [the rotating topics] were rushed and a lot of the presenters forgot information or didn't have enough time to give it all.” During a U-FE Committee meeting, the Assistant Dean of Instruction noted that, “It seems like a lot of [students] indicated they felt rushed. Like it just felt that they were just moving through too quickly and didn't have time to absorb it.”

Even with the amount of information given, or perhaps *because* of it, some students remained confused and uncertain about their role or expectations at CMC after attending SOAR. One participant indicated, “I feel like I am mostly prepared but still nervous and not clear on some topics.” In regards to the SOAR program itself, a participant commented that, “[SOAR] was good and to the point but at points it lacked structure and I was confused as to what was happening.” Additional participants

indicated that they felt okay, but still needed to "learn more" or still had some unanswered questions that were leading them to feel overwhelmed and unprepared.

This data suggests the SOAR program may be overloading students with too much information, making the orientation experience overwhelming. Students indicated the information was too cumbersome for the allotted time frame and the sheer volume. Thus, enhancements in this area could potentially create a less overwhelming experience for students.

Finding 6: Enhancement Opportunities

"We're seeking to just improve the program based on what student perceptions are of their preparedness."

-Enrollment Services staff member on U-FE Committee

Students and the U-FE Committee both provided responses regarding opportunities to enhance the SOAR program. The suggestions for enhancement mirror the previous findings, with suggestions under the categories of academic planning, interaction with people, and interaction with place, as well as additional considerations. The data in this finding strives to further answer how student experiences can enhance the SOAR program.

Academic planning

Many students explained that academic planning was important to their academic preparation, however other students expressed that more could have been done in this area to help prepare them for their first semester. Twenty-seven respondents to the SOAR Questionnaire, or 17.76%, provided suggestions for how the SOAR program could

improve the academic planning information. One participant summarized their perception by saying, “I would have appreciated a step-by-step guide or planner for everything I would need to begin at CMC.” The responses essentially fell into three categories for improvement: registration, advising, and degree information.

Registration

A common idea students suggested to enhance the SOAR program was to change the timing of registration in the schedule. The SOAR schedule is busy (Please see Appendix F) and culminates with advising and registration. The data suggests that registration should be moved to one of the first activities of the program to “knock [out] all of the priorities first.” One participant stated that SOAR could be improved by “getting all important things like classes and payment done first.” The responses suggest that students may have found SOAR more enjoyable if they had been able to “register for our classes early” as it may have calmed their nerves.

Another key area for improvement indicated by students to improve was the registration process itself. Some students seemed to find the process unclear and disorganized. One participant thought CMC could “make the registration process a bit clearer,” while another indicated, “there could have been a more organized system registering for classes.” While students suggested that they would like a clearer registration process, none provided feedback on how it could actually be more clearly communicated or more organized. One student took organization a step further suggesting CMC “have a list of all possible classes we can take [laid] out in the same place without having to search [for] each class.”

Finally, the set-up of CMC web accounts, particularly Basecamp, was an area the students indicated could be improved to make the registration process smoother. Simply put, students want "more help with Basecamp." One participant noted registration was "confusing because no one showed us how to use Basecamp." Other participants indicated being frustrated by glitches in the Student Planning system, noting, "There were a lot of scheduling issues" and "There was a bug while registering for classes." The faculty member of the U-FE Committee commented that, "Maybe it's…the [session] leader's job to make sure every student [gets] logged in, can go to Student Planning." An Enrollment Services stakeholder agreed during a U-FE Committee meeting that the web account navigation piece frustrated students, specifically indicating that we spent the majority of the time helping students log-in to their account instead of teaching them how to use it. She explained, "So what I hit on in that [session] is to make sure that they can all get into Basecamp. Because they're struggling to do it…we spend 10 minutes and…the last few times we've done it, we've had pretty much 100% [able to log-in]." She additionally suggested having students learn how to use Basecamp by allowing them practice registration with the mandatory College 101 class.

Advising

Students indicated time and time again they wished they could have had more one-on-one time with their academic advisor. Students would have appreciated more time to ask detailed questions to and plan with their academic advisor. Student responses suggested this would have allowed them to feel more comfortable with the registration process and reassurance that they were selecting the right classes. One participant

explained that he or she would have felt better prepared with "more one on one time with my advisor or instructor to ask very detailed questions." Another student described the desire for "a chance to talk with an advisor one on one before registration if needed…so we do not end up unprepared." The U-FE Committee agreed that there needed to be a shift in how advising happens during SOAR to make sure students get pertinent degree information, as well as receive the desired one-on-one time.

Degree information

Responses to the SOAR Questionnaire indicate students do not feel confident in or well-informed about their degree program. Students offered an abundance of suggestions to improve this area, mainly stemming from the idea of educating SOAR participants about the degree program they selected. One participant noted, "One thing that could have been done differently during SOAR would be to focus more on my specific major and what I will need to prepare for in my classes." Another individual suggested, "Help students learn a little bit more about the classes they need for the major they selected."

The U-FE Committee echoed this sentiment of the students. The faculty stakeholder stated, "…having [a] sort of shared session at the beginning where the students want to get information that's pertinent to all or at least pieces that's sort of repeating often to the discipline…it makes a bit of a first collegiate experience, being part of the program…" An Enrollment Services stakeholder noted, "I feel that the students don't much realize that what they need is the academic overview and the different degree

programs. They come thinking, 'I'm gonna do this', and once they hear about what goes into it, they want to change their degree."

One participant thought it might be helpful to conduct some "mock classes…just have an example class set up or maybe group together people within majors so it's easier to transition into the major." Another participant stressed that clarifying coursework for degree programs would be useful, stating, "What could have gone differently and help me to feel more prepared would be better descriptions on classes I NEED and classes RECOMMENDED." Ultimately, the data suggests students would like more focus on their specific degree program and on "personalizing the experience a little more for each student."

Interaction with people

While an overwhelming number of students cited connection with people as their favorite or most important part of orientation, students also indicated they want more interaction with people. Basically, the data suggests the SOAR program is already facilitating interpersonal connections, but students want event more opportunity to make friends and forge relationships. This leaves the SOAR program with a lot of room for growth in this area, which directly relates to the research question surrounding how the SOAR program can be enhanced. The consensus of student responses focused mainly on three main areas: orientation groups, activities, and more one-on-one time with their academic advisor.

Orientation groups

Some student participants indicated that improvements could be made surrounding the smaller orientation groups students are separated into. Students are randomly assigned their group color with a sticker on their nametag as they check-in for orientation. This is to separate students who may arrive together and already know each other. Students stick with the group they are assigned to during every scheduled breakout session. Many students suggested changing-up the groups would allow students the opportunity to meet more people. One participant specified, "I would like if everyone was put in groups that are switched around so you are constantly meeting new people rather than being in the same group the whole time." Another suggested finding a way to have the groups interact with one another: "Possibly get the various SOAR groups to see one another, tad more interaction."

Furthermore, students provided feedback about the make-up of the groups. Some participants suggested pre-assigning groups based on degree programs. Other participants indicated that the groups were too big and people did not feel comfortable talking in their groups, making it awkward. One response stressed this by saying, "More colors for the group[s]…being in a group with over 15 antisocial people made for a boring time. Less people would mean less stress on talking." Contrarily, other participants felt the groups were too small and that having bigger groups would allow them to meet more people.

Finally, students felt their group leaders were uncomfortable and needed more training, explaining that "the student RA helpers could have been more prepared for their groups." The group leaders are comprised of paid student staff members who are hired by

the Student Life Department to be Conference and/or Resident Assistants. Being an Orientation Leader is part of their job. One participant explained that the SOAR experience would have been better "if the group leaders were more prepared, our leader kept on saying she had [no] idea what she was supposed to do [after] the first activity and it was sort of awkwardly silent."

Activities

The interaction between peers during activities was another suggestion made by SOAR Questionnaire respondents. Students indicated they wanted more ice-breaker activities worked into the small groups to get to know their peers better. Most responses simply state that more ice-breakers or more activities that require socialization would have improved their experience. As one participant explained, "I think more emphasis on the team building [exercises] would do a good job in creating strong relationships early on and help people integrate themselves with the community." Other participants wished that the group activities were a "bit more personalized and organized." The U-FE Committee agreed that any activity structured around a peer groups may help encourage social development and peer relationships. The Committee also suggested that while informative, SOAR should also be fun. One stakeholder stated, "[Students] should be doing fun stuff…Getting to meet each other, know each other, playing..."

One-on-one time

Many students indicated they would like more one-on-one time with faculty. Students felt that spending more one-on-one time personally engaging with the faculty would have alleviated some of their anxieties and allowed them to get to know their

advisor better. Students also felt that spending more time with their advisor would have allowed them to feel more prepared. Simply put by one respondent, “I think that more talking with professors and administrators would make me feel more prepared.” Another student stated that it would have improved his or her level of preparedness to have “more one on one time with my advisor or instructor to ask very detailed questions.” An Enrollment Services committee member summarized the questionnaire data that the U-FE Committee was looking at by stating, “They're all saying they want more one-on-one time. But also, students who got one-on-one time are saying they want more one-on-one time. So, you know, I think the answer is just they want more one-on-one time with their advisor.”

In relation to the SOAR Questionnaire, the faculty stakeholder suggested we present this data to the faculty to help shape their understanding of the impact they have on students. He explained, “Someone coming in, they are not going to be super comfortable yet and the trust that's built…building that first connection one-on-one. You're going to be in the class with this person, can you trust them in the class? I feel like that [one-on-one] time is kind of invaluable.” The Assistant Dean of Instruction voiced some concerns about the reality of providing more one-on-one time, stating, “My biggest worry is the sustainability [of the one-on-one format]…we are never going to know exactly how many students are coming [to SOAR]…and you may have good or bad faculty for those students. So, if these students are telling us that they want more one-on-one, well we may have eight students coming and only one person in that discipline or we have eight students coming and no one wanting to advise them in that discipline. And

how do we then do this [long-term]? How do we say, we're going to give everyone more one-on-one time, but we don't really have that for everybody?"

Interaction with place

Although students were able to get acquainted with CMC during SOAR, they also had many suggestions for what may have helped them feel more familiar with their surroundings, thus helping them feel more socially prepared. When asked what could have been done at SOAR to improve their level or preparation or overall experience, 22 students, or 13.75%, indicated an improvement to their interaction with place would have elevated their experience during SOAR. Two categories emerged in the data in relation to student perceptions of enhancements to interaction with place: tours of campus and town and on-campus versus off-campus sessions.

Tour of campus and town

Of the 22 students that called for improved interaction with place, 17 students cited a tour of campus and/or Steamboat would have helped them feel better prepared to begin in the fall. The U-FE Committee unanimously agreed with this, suggesting offering tour of campus and town during SOAR. The College Counselor on the U-FE Committee stated, "[We should] make sure that everybody gets the chance to do the campus tour." Another stakeholder elaborated, "I think that that [a campus tour] would be good because it was mentioned both in [regards to] preparedness and to improve [SOAR]…So they're spending more time with [their leader] and having more time to ask questions."

Students felt a more formalized tour of campus, perhaps in their small groups, would have assisted them in knowing where everything was located on campus, thus

making them feel more comfortable entering CMC. One participant indicated they would have felt better prepared with “a tour of the campus, I had to explore on my own to feel confident in the layout.” Another participant concurred, stating, “In my view a short tour would be nice to know your way around the school with no trouble.” This proposes that perhaps there should be a campus tour included in the SOAR schedule. The U-FE Committee believed that to incorporate tour of campus, the Orientation Leaders would need to be trained on how to give a tour.

Incorporating the town of Steamboat Springs into orientation was another factor that came up in the data from the SOAR Questionnaire. Students indicated they wished they had been able to gain more familiarity with the town by “explor[ing] a little bit of the city.” One participant stated, “It would be more beneficial if we could tour the town with the RA's so we could get a feel for where things are in the town. It would be a lot of people walking around the town but it could be split up into multiple small groups at different times.” Another participant stated that CMC could have better prepared students “by incorporating things to do off campus.” These student perspectives encourage consideration to adding an off-campus exploration component to orientation beyond the hot springs activity. The U-FE Committee discussed integrating a tour of Steamboat into the SOAR experience so that students were able to learn more about the town they would be living in. To accomplish this, stakeholders discussed having the groups ride the free bus system in town to assist them in learning how to use public transportation while seeing the highlights of Steamboat.

On-campus versus off-campus

Another common idea to enhance the student interaction with place was to address the difference between on-campus and off-campus students. Of the 152 participants in this study, 121, or 79%, indicated they were going to live on-campus, 30, or 19.74%, indicated that they were going to live off-campus, and one student did not select either option.

The population of off-campus students generally indicated that there should be some consideration given to the fact that they may not need the same information as the on-campus students. One participant suggested, “Make [SOAR] so it's more local based. I felt like it was more focused on non-locals and the kids who only came here for the mountain.” Some participants specifically requested different sessions for off-campus students, stating, “Maybe have different sessions/sections of the day for off campus students, as most of the information presented in various sessions did not apply to me at all,” and “[Have] different segments and/or sessions for off campus kiddos.”

Based on this data, an Enrollment Services staff member on the U-FE Committee proposed that perhaps there should be a separate SOAR session for local students who plan to live off-campus for the academic year. The staff member stated, “Maybe doing a condensed one-day orientation that would just be for local students who know early on that they’re coming here. Because one of the pieces…of our data was that [students] felt like SOAR was a waste of their time.” Another U-FE Committee member enthusiastically agreed, stating, “I think it's an awesome idea. I mean, I think it would actually help us recruit more of our local students the first year.”

Additional considerations

Two other considerations that the data indicated may help enhance SOAR were placement testing improvements and the SOAR schedule itself.

Placement Testing

Both students and the U-FE Committee had some suggestions regarding enhancing the placement testing process. Placement testing is offered during SOAR to ensure that students register for the appropriate level classes for their academic level. Students expressed frustration that they were unprepared as they did not anticipate having to a test. Participants did note the importance of testing, one individual stating, “It was good for me and my peers to know what classes to take.” Four different students indicated that testing frustrated them because they were unaware testing would be required.

Students who met the testing requirement through other avenues (e.g. SAT, ACT, or college credits) also expressed frustration with the testing process. They indicated that not having to test created a lot of down-time for them and they got bored. One participant explained, “I think the second day could have less down time in morning,” which is when testing takes place (please see Appendix F for SOAR schedule). Another individual stated, “Maybe try and chunk [the testing schedule] up a little more so that nobody gets bored while they have nothing to do.”

One participant provided a detailed suggestion regarding having students who do not need to complete testing register for classes while the students who do need to take the test do so. This individual proposed, “For students who don't need to take the

Accuplacer test, have them sign up for classes early, and then for people who were in group A have them sign up for classes while Group B does the testing and then have the Group B do [registration] after their test so everything goes a little faster and there isn't a lot of sitting around so people can go home." During a U-FE Committee meeting an Enrollment Services stakeholder agreed with this sentiment asking, "But people who don't need to test, instead of just saying, 'Hey you got a couple of hours free' is there something that we could do at that point? Could we start registration?"

Schedule

The schedule was an area many students believed could be enhanced to make SOAR better. Twenty-four students, or 15.79% of all participants, had specific suggestions about how the schedule could be updated, most revolving around time. One participant simply stated, "START LATER!" Another individual was in agreement with this idea, suggesting, "[SOAR should] not start so early, maybe 10am would be better so people don't show up tired and are unengaged."

The U-FE Committee unanimously agreed that it is important to "keep [SOAR participants] busy." An Enrollment Services stakeholder stated, "I don't like to give them too much free time." Student participants agreed, suggesting orientation should be condensed to "make it a little bit shorter." One respondent suggested that SOAR could be enhanced if it was not "bunched in for [2 or] 3 days." Another participant explained, "I think it should be done in a single day instead of two days." An additional participant echoed this from the point of view of a student who traveled for SOAR, commenting that SOAR should "not [be] a 2-day thing for those far away."

Conclusion

The findings outlined above address the research questions designed for this study. The retention finding, under the category of combined preparedness, suggests through numerical data that attending orientation may be a factor in students staying a CMC. The finding of academic planning helps provide insight into student perceptions about their academic preparedness to enter their first semester at CMC. The findings of interaction with people and interaction with place specifically explore student perceptions about their social preparedness for their first semester. Finally, the information overload and program enhancement findings address the topic of how student experiences can enhance the SOAR program. In Chapter 5 these findings will be analyzed and discussed, with implications and recommendations for improvement created based on the discussion.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to conduct a program evaluation of the Student Orientation and Registration (SOAR) program at the Steamboat Springs campus of Colorado Mountain College. SOAR is the mandatory orientation program for all new students who are living on campus and/or are under 21 years old with less than 24 college credits already completed. Detailed information about the SOAR program can be found in Appendix F.

The SOAR program is designed to prepare students for their first semester at CMC. This study was designed to understand students' perceptions about their level of preparation academically and socially for their first semester at CMC after attending SOAR. This study employed Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) to evaluate the existing program and to make recommendations to improve SOAR to assist students in their preparation for and transition into the first semester. This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions about their preparedness?
    a. In what ways do students feel orientation has prepared them for the academic aspects of college?

b. In what ways do students feel that orientation has prepared them for the social aspects of college?

2. In what ways can student experiences enhance the SOAR program?

This chapter seeks to analyze the findings from Chapter 4 as they relate to the research questions and create recommendations to improve SOAR based upon the findings and the recommendations of the U-FE Committee.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis below is based upon the findings from the SOAR Questionnaire completed by 95% of all SOAR participants, institutional data, and data from the U-FE Committee. There was a total of six findings which fell into the broader themes of combined preparedness, academic preparedness, social preparedness, and program enhancements. The analysis mirrors the same structure as the findings in Chapter 4 where the broader theme is briefly discussed and then each finding within that theme analyzed using the data, theoretical framework, and literature previously outlined.

Combined Preparedness

Orientation programs must be designed to "facilitate the transition of new students into the institution, prepare students for the institution's educational opportunities and student responsibilities, and initiate the integration of new students into the intellectual, cultural, and social facets of the institution" (CAS, 2014, p. 5). Additionally, orientation programs should introduce students to the academic, cultural, and social facets of the institution (CAS, 2014). The standards for orientation align with the notion of combined preparedness; that students must understand and navigate both the

academic and social culture of an institution. Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) further posit that the nature of the student experience, including student involvement in the academic and social systems of the institution, is more important than the characteristics of the institution itself. If students are not connected to the institution in both the academic and social arenas, they are less likely to retain at the institution (Astin, 1984; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1988).

Finding 1: Retention

As previously noted, it is crucial for colleges and universities to quickly connect with incoming students to increase the likelihood of student retention. As Tinto (1988) pointed out, the first six weeks of the first semester are the most impressionable period for new students, typically this is the timeframe students decide whether they are going to stay at the institution. As suggested by multiple studies, students who attend orientation programming are more likely to retain at an institution for a variety of reasons, including engaging with the institution, understanding institutional policies, connecting with peers, identifying physical locations on campus, and understanding the registration process, (Astin, 1984; Deggs et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2002). Further, Soria et al. (2013) stated that "First-year student programs, including new student orientation, are critically important to higher education institutions because they are well-positioned to make the most positive impact on overall student retention" (p. 34).

The reports supplied by CMC's Institutional Research Department (IR), determined that students who attended the SOAR program had a retention rate of 75.84% from the fall to spring semesters, while students who did not attend SOAR had a retention

rate of only 53.7%. There are many factors that may account for the discrepancy in the retention rate of students who attended orientation compared with those that did not, however, it seems that orientation may play a key role in student retention within this study. Attrition happens for many reasons; studies have shown that both nonacademic and academic variables can cause students to leave college. When students feel dissatisfied in the academic setting, their motivation decreases, leading to a poor academic performance (Strayhorn, 2012). Some of the nonacademic reasons for attrition include social isolation, personal-emotional issues, negative attitudes about the collegiate environment, and attachment to the institution (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Martin et al., 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1987; Wilder, 1983). SOAR is aimed to proactively assist students in these areas, providing students a place to connect with their peers, provide connections with appropriate institutional supports, create a positive and exciting environment, and build a bond between participants and CMC. If students feel cared for and connected, to both their peers and to the institution, then they are more likely to persist in their education (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

There are several studies that have linked orientation to having positive effects on retention rates, supporting the finding that retention was correlated to SOAR attendance. Astin (1993) found that an effective orientation program would increase the likelihood of student persistence by facilitating both academic adjustment and social integration from the very beginning of the college journey. Furthermore, Levitz and Noel (1989) found that orientation created an opportunity to connect new students closely with an institutional employee, thereby creating a connection to the institution and creating a

supportive environment. This is further supported by the suggestion of Museus et al. (2017) to practice holistic support to create a culturally engaging campus. Orientation also provides students with the opportunity to learn campus resources, ask about campus expectations, and connect directly with the environment of the institution (Chasteen, 2005). SOAR is intentionally designed to take both academic and social factors into consideration. The compilation of the retention data regarding students who attended orientation compared to those who have not and other studies that have had similar findings lead to the conclusion that attending orientation had a positive impact on the likelihood of new student retention from the fall 2018 to spring 2019 semesters at CMC Steamboat Springs.

Academic Preparedness

Generally speaking, academic preparedness includes academic readiness in English and math, as well as the actions of the college or university in aiding students in the transition into the world of college academics (Strayhorn, 2012). In 2017 60% of all students at the Steamboat Springs campus of CMC were not college-ready and were required to enroll in a remedial English or math class (CMC Campus Portrait, 2017). This statistic proves to be slightly below the national average of students entering two-year colleges needing remedial education, which is 63% (CollegeBoard, 2011). Out of the SOAR participants that enrolled in the 2018 fall semester, 73, or 49.99%, enrolled in one or more developmental education classes during the 2018-19 academic year. This was much lower than the 60% of students enrolled in remedial classes campus-wide, as well

as the national average. This suggests that perhaps students who attend SOAR are more academically prepared in terms of their college-readiness.

The finding within academic preparedness specifically focus on academic planning. This is the piece of academic preparedness in which the institution assists students with their transition into college. The findings indicate that students feel more academically prepared for their first semester through CMC's assistance with academic planning, answering the research question: In what ways do students feel orientation has prepared them for the academic aspects of college?

Finding 2: Academic Planning

Academic planning played a key role in students feeling academically prepared to enter their first semester at CMC. Students are either academically college-ready or they are not (CollegeBoard, 2011); however, being that CMC is an open enrollment institution it affords everyone access to education. As previously noted, nearly half of the participants in SOAR were required to take at least one developmental education class. Since it is the role of CMC to provide education for all, they must ensure that the academic resources available to students will assist them in their success to complete pre-collegiate coursework, particularly because only a small percentage of academically underprepared students move-on to college-level work (Bueschel, 2009).

The finding of academic planning revolved around students feeling more prepared to enter their first semester at CMC when assisted with the planning process. Students indicated that academic planning allowed them to have a better understanding of what to expect from their first semester. Students noted that the most useful academic planning

was in the form of registration and advising, which allowed them to plan for future success. This is reinforced by research, which has suggested it is the role and responsibility of the institution to provide students with a clear introduction to the academic facets of the college and equip them with the knowledge and policies they need to be successful (CAS, 2014; Mann et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 1996).

Students who are academically underprepared are less likely to have a long-term degree plan in place, making the degree seem less attainable and college seem daunting (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). This is where academic planning through advising was significant. During SOAR, every student was required to spend time with an advisor to plan and discuss their curriculum, long-term plans, and goals. Academic advising is critical to the student experience, especially in assisting students navigate new college processes, including the registration process (Woods et al., 2017). Further, advising has been positively linked to retention and engagement (Joslin, 2018). The more advising and planning that CMC can offer students during SOAR, the more prepared and comfortable they will feel. The data demonstrates that students found academic planning, including advising and registration, to be significant in helping them feel prepared to enter their first semester at CMC and beyond, aligning with the importance of advising found in literature.

This finding of academic planning directly ties to the Ecology of Transition. In the microsystem, Schlossberg (1981) characterizes academic resources as an institutional support that directly impacts students. As students move into the mesosystem of the Ecology of Transition, they experience the *moving in* phase of transition, in which they

are learning their new roles and understanding the academic expectations (Schlossberg et. al, 2012). The data indicates that students valued the registration and advising resources offered to them during SOAR and experienced *moving in*. Additionally, Museus (2014) places the responsibility of assisting students through this role change on CMC. The data shows that students generally felt like the academic resources provided by CMC assisted in their preparation.

While most students felt the academic planning they participated in at CMC prepared them for their first semester, other students noted feelings of nervousness or anxiousness. According to research, feelings of anxiety are common during a transitional period (Schlossberg, 1981; Tinto, 1988). The students who indicated they felt nervous equated this to being unprepared to begin. Students felt nervous because they did not know what to expect academically and not knowing if they would be able to keep up with the workload and rigor of college. According to research, it is common for students to feel nervous and anxious

Social Preparedness

Social preparedness is imperative to aiding students in navigating the social and cultural demands of the college environment (Sommerfeld, 2011). Building a sense of belonging on campus was especially important in the findings of this study. Sense of belonging is a "basic human need" and plays an important role in the well-being of students (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 9). To feel a sense of belonging, students must experience social integration into the campus environment (Tinto, 1987). Students who attended SOAR indicated that their social integration began during the orientation program in two

important ways: through interaction with people and through interaction with place. These finding address the research question: In what ways do students feel orientation has prepared them for the social aspects of college?

Finding 3: Interaction with People

Orientation programming is usually designed to create a sense of community and foster relationships among students, which facilitates a sense of belonging (Astin, 1984; Mann et al., 2010; Robinson et al. 1996). Students are most likely to be successful and persist to graduation if they integrate into the social fabric of the institution (Tinto, 1987). More than a third of SOAR participants specified that connecting with a peer, faculty, or staff member was the most important thing they did during orientation; further, exactly half of the SOAR participants indicated that some form of interaction with others was their favorite part of SOAR. Students believed that orientation had given them a platform to make friends and connect with faculty and staff, thus allowing them to begin their social integration to CMC. This aligns with the findings from Miller et al. (2002), in which their research determined that the most important part of orientation for students was developing positive relationships with other new students. Karp (2011) supports these connections as essential parts of the student experience, citing 'creating social relationships' as a non-academic mechanism for student success.

Interaction with people allowed SOAR participants to begin to build their microsystem in their new environment, which is arguably the most important of the systems in the Ecology of Transition (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The peers, faculty, and staff that students connected with during orientation will become the influencers and

internal support system for the individual to help them cope with the transition to college (Schlossberg, 2008) and help shape the individual's experience and collegiate success (Museus, 2014).

Connection with peers and connection with faculty and staff can mean different things to students. As evidenced in this study, connecting with peers was important to students because it allowed them to "make friends" and "have people to hang with." Students felt more prepared to begin their first semester at CMC after getting to know some of their peers and making friends. Literature shows that meaningful relationships with peers can assist students in establishing a sense of belonging, therefore making them feel connected and retain at the institution (Strayhorn, 2012). Students viewed the connection with faculty and staff as more of a mentor-mentee relationship. Students indicated that they saw faculty and staff as a support system, believing that these are the people they can go to with questions and for guidance and support. Other studies have drawn these same conclusions, finding that faculty are essential to how students perform academically, their persistence, and how a student 'fits' at an institution (Astin, 1984; Larsen, 2016; Schriener et al., 2011; Tinto, 1988).

The literature surrounding the importance of connecting with people supports the findings of this study. By creating opportunities for interaction with others during SOAR, students were able to develop meaningful relationships, therefore forming a supportive microsystem that will assist the individual in engaging with the institution and ultimately retain at CMC. When students feel that they connect and belong, they are more likely to be prepared and successful (Strayhorn, 2012).

Finding 4: Interaction with Place

Orientation experiences are designed to familiarize students with the surrounding environment, in-turn helping students to feel more comfortable and ready to start the semester (Koch & Gardner, 2014; Robinson et al., 1996). SOAR participants indicated that experiencing the physical settings and the atmosphere of campus and Steamboat Springs assisted them in feeling more prepared for their first semester at CMC. This finding fits within one of the main purposes of orientation, to introduce students to their new environment (CAS, 2014).

The physical environment of campus can impact student behavior, considering the layout and location of services may encourage students interact with various spaces more or less frequently (Kuh, 2009). Realistically, if an office is prominent or easy to find students are more likely to utilize that service. While the SOAR program strove to introduce students to the physical environment and services on campus, it failed to ensure that every student interacted with every building on campus, thus lowering the likelihood of students locating various offices and services. In addition to the physical setting, attitudes of a positive campus culture played a factor in helping students feel prepared after SOAR. The students categorized observations about the campus culture as the "atmosphere."

Karp (2011) describes the notion of learning to navigate the campus environment as "developing college know-how" (p. 6). She argues that giving students information about the campus will increase the likelihood that students will access college services, as they will know where to find them (Karp, 2011). This directly ties back to the finding of

interaction with people, as students who feel a sense of belonging on campus are more likely to feel connected to the institution and utilize campus resources (Kuh, 2009).

The finding of interaction with place during orientation impacts the macrosystem in the Ecology of Transition, as the environmental factors can have a profound effect on students' orientation experiences and their ultimate transition into college (Schlossberg, 2008). Bronfebbrenner (1979) described his macrosystem as the world around the individual, including the physical setting and attitudes of the environment. Further, the physical setting can play an important role in students adapting to transition (Schlossberg, 1981). The experience that students had during SOAR with both the physical setting of campus and the cultural attitudes most likely helped shape and impact their individual transition into CMC. It is also crucial to take into account the concept of cultural relevance as part of the macrosystem, ensuring the SOAR program accounted for students from diverse cultural backgrounds feeling understood and accepted (Museus et al., 2017).

Program Enhancements

To best improve the SOAR program, it is important to account for student feedback regarding what they experienced during the orientation program and how these experiences could have been positively changed or enhanced. Program enhancement and improvement is a fundamental goal of the U-FE methodology employed by this study, in which the stakeholders took ownership in understanding the data, and therefore have a vested interest in the continued success of the program and will be more likely to implement change (Patton, 2008). The findings under the category of program

enhancement serve as answers to the research question: In what ways can student experiences enhance the SOAR program?

Finding 5: Information Overload

Providing the necessary basic information students need to enroll at an institution in a clear and accurate way is a challenge (Karp, 2011). Since the SOAR program was offered over a two-to-three-day period, the program moved very quickly with a lot of sessions and activities packed into those days. Students reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information that was provided, which can be associated with students feeling a loss of control over their orientation experience (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). Students believed the information provided was important, but too much to take-in all at once. The term 'information overload' specifically refers to various conditions, including the quantity of information being received, how the information is being processed by individuals, and if said individuals are able to remember and retrieve the provided information (Khalid et al., 2016). Information overload "occurs when information received becomes a hindrance rather than a help, even though the information is potentially useful" (Bawden & Robinson, 2009, p. 183).

The idea of 'too much information' is exasperated by the multiple formats in which students are provided information, as well as the sheer volume of material they need to know to successfully transition into college (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). Bawden and Robinson (2009) argue that if an individual does not perceive value in the information being provided or if the information is not easily accessible, they may ignore it. To avoid information overload, student learning processes, the educational

environment or method of information dissemination, and the learner himself must be taken into consideration (Bawden & Robinson, 2009; Khalid et al., 2016), which suggests tailoring the orientation experience for each individual and allowing them to have materials to refer back to. It is up to CMC to determine what modality to offer information to students, as well as to determine what information is essential to provide during orientation and what information may be able to be provided prior to or after the SOAR experience.

Finding 6: Enhancement Opportunities.

Student experiences and feedback shaped the enhancement opportunities finding from this study; they were very clear in identifying how their experience could have been improved to make them feel more academically and socially prepared for their first semester at CMC.

Academic planning

Students were very eager to suggest that the academic planning processes during orientation could have been more effective if they had been structured differently. Students indicated that having registration earlier in the SOAR experience, clarifying the registration process itself, and better assisting students with navigating their web accounts would have helped them feel more prepared.

Students also believed that the advising experience could have been enhanced. This was especially evident for students who received group advising. Students described wanting more personalized advising sessions with their academic advisor, while still

receiving all of the programmatic information they need. The U-FE Committee agreed that the advising experience could be enhanced

It is not surprising that advising is cited as an area of enhancement, as students at colleges all over the country are consistently dissatisfied with the academic advising that they receive (Goomas, 2012). Drake (2011) pointed out that, "Good academic advising also provides perhaps the only opportunity for all students to develop a personal, consistent relationship with someone in the institution who cares about them." This fits with Museus's (2014) notion of holistic support and allows the advisor to become a member of the student's microsystem.

With trying to register all orientation participants in one scheduled time frame, students may be left waiting and feel misinformed about their academic plan (Goomas, 2012). SOAR participants indicated that they would like more straight-forward information about their degree programs as part of the advising process. Both advising and registration have been linked to student satisfaction and student retention, particularly because it can assist students with their social and academic integration into their new community (Hale et al., 2009).

Interaction with people

While students were generally satisfied with the opportunity to interact with others, they strongly indicated that they want more interaction with people. Students noted their SOAR experience would have been enhanced if there had been more cross-over between small groups, Orientation Leaders were better trained, additional ice-breaker activities to get to know peers, and more one-on-one time with their faculty

advisor. All of these suggestions support the social connection and preparedness of students. Further, they allow students to begin to build their microsystem.

Soria et al. (2013) agreed with the importance of making meaningful social connections during orientation, particularly in a small group setting. They stated, "students may feel more connected to the institution if they experience orientation in a smaller peer group—especially those led by peer leaders—which allows students to develop meaningful social connections with other students" (Soria et al, 2013, p. 44). Based on this, combined with the suggestions from the SOAR participants, it is imperative that SOAR provide students the opportunity to interact with one another in peer-led small groups. This additionally requires that the peer leaders are trained to facilitate small group experiences, as their effectiveness can create a successful or unsuccessful orientation experience for the new students (CAS, 2014; Posner & Rosenberger, 1997).

Interaction with place

Students believed that their SOAR experience could have been enhanced had they received tours of the CMC campus and Steamboat Springs. The SOAR program did not include formal tours as part of the schedule. Most orientation programs offer some form of acquainting students with the college campus (CAS, 2017). In fact, one of the Orientation Program standards required by CAS (2017) is, "Orientation Programs must provide information about the physical layout of campus, including the location and purposes of campus facilities, support services, co-curricular venues, and administrative offices." While the SOAR program provided a map for students, it did not offer a guided

tour of campus. This is something that students felt was lacking and could be improved upon.

SOAR participants, particularly students who planned to live off-campus, also indicated that orientation was too focused on the students from out of the area and residential students. In viewing SOAR information, it is true that some of it is focused on student life and living on-campus. The differences between residential and commuter students are not always recognized, but need to be addressed in order to best serve each population. Additionally, commuter students are often expected to function in an educational environment designed for a traditional, residential population (Silverman et al., 2008). That being said, it is still imperative that off-campus students receive information related to policies and expectations, as well as have a chance to connect with other new students. Silverman et al. (2008) pointed out that the requirements to begin an education can be overwhelming for commuter students if they can only be accomplished at one particular time, such as at an orientation program. Often times, residential students view the college campus as their home, while commuter students see it as a place to visit for academic reasons; thus, colleges and universities must work harder to connect the commuter students to campus (Silverman et al., 2008). Since off-campus students reported dissatisfaction with their experience during SOAR, it is essential for changes to be made to the structure of the program to better serve the commuter population.

Additional considerations

Students expressed possible enhancements in the areas of placement testing and the SOAR schedule itself. Placement testing is a requirement by the state and cannot be

removed from the enrollment process. CMC has found the best way to offer placement testing to be during orientation, as students are already on campus and it is free of charge, however, students indicated feeling unprepared to take the test during SOAR. Students are welcome to take placement testing before they come to SOAR either online or at another testing center, however they would be required to pay for it themselves. CMC is currently in the process of moving to a multiple-measures assessment to place students in the appropriate level classes. If this is successfully implemented, less students will need placement testing during orientation moving forward. The success of multiple-measures, placement testing, and class placement is a study onto itself that should be conducted in future research after it is fully implemented at CMC.

As far the schedule itself, students indicated that the event started too early and students felt they had too much downtime while others were testing. There are many ways to run an orientation program, but there is not much research surrounding how the timing of events during the program might impact success. There are several models of orientation program formats that can be followed to offer an impactful orientation program (please see Appendix A for an overview of the various formats). CMC's SOAR program is currently structured as a Summer Orientation Program (Mann et al., 2010).

Recommendations for Practice

The findings in this study suggest that there are many parts of the SOAR program that students perceive as being effective in helping prepare them to be a student at CMC. Conversely, there are several changes that can be made to improve the student experience during SOAR. The nature of the Utilization-Focused Evaluation framework used in this

study allows the U-FE Committee to help drive and inform the recommendations for improvement of the SOAR program. The recommendations below have been formulated from a compilation of the findings of this study, U-FE Committee recommendations, and best practices in orientation programming derived from the literature. The recommendations are organized by starting with loftier, big-picture changes that will have the highest impact. The scope of the recommendations narrows to the easily attainable recommendations towards the end of the section.

Recommendation One: Orientation for All

As outlined in the retention finding, students who attended SOAR retained for the next semester at a rate of 22.14% higher than those who did not attend SOAR. This data, along with literature, suggests that SOAR may be one of many factors that led to retention (Astin, 1984; Deggs et al., 2011; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Miller et al., 2002; Soria et al., 2013). Requiring some form of an orientation program for all new students may positively impact retention at the Steamboat campus of CMC. Orientation does not necessarily need to be offered to all in the format of the SOAR program, but could be offered via abbreviated in-person sessions, online in real-time, a series of produced videos, and/or a hybrid of these modalities.

Recommendation Two: Change the Format of the SOAR Program

The SOAR program is currently designed in the format of a Summer Orientation Program, in which students not only complete academic advising and registration, but are introduced to academic and social policies and procedures, support services, and their lives as college students (Mann et al, 2010). The findings of this study suggest that

perhaps the Summer/Fall Orientation Hybrid would better serve the students. In this format, students would come to campus over the summer to complete part one of orientation, which would consist of academic advising, course registration, and establish connections with peers, faculty, and staff. All students would be expected to move to campus prior to the start of the term to complete part two of orientation, which would consist of academic and social policies and procedures, more in-depth information about services on campus, set expectations for the semester, and allow further opportunity for connections with peers (Mann et al., 2010). Please see Appendix A for additional information about orientation program formats.

Changing the SOAR format was a recommendation that was supported by the U-FE Committee. An Enrollment Services member of the U-FE Committee suggested this type of restructure, stating, "Well maybe we just do the registration over the summer and the first couple of days of August would be orientation…I think taking the model of orientation in the direction that we're discussing, we solve a lot of the feedback that the students provided as far as condensing the schedule, getting them registered for classes earlier, more one-on-one [advising]." The U-FE Committee agreed and workshopped a proposed Summer/Fall Orientation Hybrid schedule.

The proposed schedule changes directly address the feedback provided by students in the following ways:

1. Academic planning: To accommodate students' desires to have more time planning their degree, the proposed schedule offers added major-specific sessions. These sessions will focus on the specific degree students have chosen,

information that pertains to the group, and the path to graduation and beyond. It also introduces students to the faculty members specific to their area of study.

2. Interaction with people: The proposed schedule creates additional opportunities for peer interaction, as desired by students. It allows more time for small group activities, as well as two all-inclusive evening activities. Furthermore, since students will have a group session with their faculty advisor and peers in their program, it will allow students to work through the more process-oriented information as a group, creating more meaningful time to connect with their advisor during their one-on-one advising session.
3. Interaction with place: A campus tour is included as an open station in the proposed schedule. The U-FE Committee has proposed that tours are available for an hour and a half period for students and families. Additionally, there will be off-campus evening activities that will include either a scheduled bus tour of town on the way to the activity or an Orientation Leader acting as a guide taking students downtown.
4. Information overload: The proposed schedule works to spread the information out over a longer time period. It requires students to learn about a few topics, including registration, academics, financial aid, and web accounts during the registration period. This would be formatted differently to include a brief information session on each topic, followed by an open-ended format for students to visit the stations they feel are most important to them. Additional topics, including support services, financing, student life and well-being, and student nuts

and bolts, would be covered during the orientation period a few days before classes begin. The spread of this information may be helpful for the students who attend registration in June, however for the students that attend in August it is still going to be a lot of information to digest in a short amount of time.

5. Additional considerations: This first additional consideration that the proposed schedule addresses is placement testing. Since students indicated they had a lot of down time if they did not have to placement test, the U-FE Committee suggested having the students who are in need of placement testing arrive first and all other students arrive later in the day. This also addresses the schedule changes requested for a large population of students, allowing their SOAR experience to start later. Additionally, this may incentivize students to complete placement testing prior to arriving to campus for orientation.

Please see Appendix I to view the U-FE Committee's proposed orientation schedule.

Recommendation Three: Tailor the Information Offered at SOAR

Since students felt that they were on information overload during their SOAR experience, it would be helpful to disseminate information over time as opposed to all at once. The proposed format and schedule change under Recommendation Two above would allow information to be spread-out a bit more and compartmentalized. Additionally, it would behoove CMC to implement an online component to orientation. An online orientation would be beneficial in several ways: (1) it could be supplied to *all* incoming students, not just those who are required to attend SOAR, (2) students would have access to refer back to the information, and (3) it would allow students to get some

basic needs such as setting-up and navigating their CMC web accounts accomplished ahead of SOAR. If students are prepared when entering orientation, the program can focus on preparing them for the semester instead of processes (Mann et al., 2010). Additionally, this would allow students to receive information in another way, as well as further spread-out the in-take of information.

Recommendation Four: Offer Another Option to Off-campus Students

One of the findings of this study involved off-campus students' perceptions that the SOAR program was designed for students coming from out of the area and living on campus. As the research points out, commuter student needs differ from residential student needs, which should be taken into account in the design of the SOAR program (Silverman et al., 2008). While commuter students are often local to CMC and may have taken classes during high school, they still need to attend orientation and receive the necessary information to promote their success. The Assistant Dean of Instruction on the U-FE Committee stated, "But one thing that you always hear commuters do is complain about the multiple day orientation because they know everything already, 'I lived in Steamboat my whole life and I know everything there is to know about CMC.' Now they show up in day one they don't know anything. They do need to have some orientation, like they can't just show up to our systems."

The U-FE Committee concluded that having a separate orientation for local area students would be mutually beneficial to the students and to CMC. It was suggested that CMC could offer an orientation session to locals before they even graduated from high school, giving them the opportunity to register early and saves them time. This is

beneficial for CMC because it is an incentive to recruit our local students to attend CMC and gets them in the door earlier. One member of the U-FE Committee stated, "For local students, we could consider maybe doing a condensed one-day orientation that would be almost an incentive for local students who know early-on that they are coming here." In creating a separate orientation option for commuter students, CMC would need to ensure that they were still invested in connecting with other students by encouraging them to attend Welcome Week activities, or perhaps activities during other orientation sessions.

Recommendation Five: Create Additional Opportunities for Academic Planning

The findings of this study in conjunction with the literature indicate students want more opportunities for academic planning, including more one-on-one time with their advisor, more information about their degree programs, and clarity in the registration process (Joslin, 2018; Mann et al., 2010; Woods et al., 2017). All of these items can be accomplished by changing the advising and registration process during SOAR. Assuming that the program format is changed, as outlined in Recommendation Two, there would be ample opportunity to provide students with degree-specific information and one-on-one advising time.

The counselor stakeholder on the U-FE Committee proposed a hybrid of group and individual advising for all students. He stated that "[Advisors] find [themselves] repeating the same things over and over and over…individually to one-on-one [advisees]…there's a huge amount of overlap in terms of common classes that everybody takes, no matter what program they're in," therefore perhaps advisors could meet with all their advisees as a group to go over the basics and then take more one-on-one time with

students to get to know their goals instead of focusing on explaining the basics repeatedly. The administrator on the U-FE Committee agreed, stating, "You give them group advising with the faculty that are the experts in [the subject] and then you're giving them one-on-one. So, they'll have some time to think about it…they can actually do some stuff before they come to the registration advising."

The proposed schedule in Appendix I has a time-slot specifically for an academic session in which students would be divided into their majors to receive general curriculum, schedule recommendations, and an opportunity to ask general questions in a group setting. This would be followed-up with an individual appointment during the registration process later that day where students could discuss their schedule and academic goals with their advisor in a one-on-one setting.

Recommendation Six: Create Additional Opportunities for Peer Engagement

While students indicated that they enjoyed the opportunities they had to interact with peers during SOAR, they also indicated that they wanted *more* opportunities to engage with and get to know their peers. This can be accomplished by adding more ice-breaker activities, changing small groups more frequently so students have the opportunity to interact with multiple groups of students, and/or adding more off-campus activities to the schedule (CAS, 2014; Mann et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2002; Soria et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, changing the format of orientation would allow more peer engagement, as there would be opportunity for this in both parts one and two of orientation.

To successfully facilitate additional peer engagement, it is essential that the Orientation Leaders are well-trained and comfortable leading and creating engagement among their small groups (Soria et al., 2013). An Enrollment Services staff member on the U-FE Committee suggested the staff needed additional training, stating, "Another piece of feedback we got was CA and RA orientation staff not really knowing what they're doing, feeling a little clueless, not connecting with their group. So, I think that that would be simply some additional training that we could give them."

Recommendation Seven: Offer Campus and Town Tours to Students

Students indicated that they wanted more formal tours of campus and of Steamboat Springs to better connect with the institution and the area, which are notions supported by literature, including the works of Karp (2011) and Kuh (2009). The U-FE Committee unanimously agreed that tours of campus should be integrated into the SOAR schedule, ensuring that everybody gets a chance to participate in a tour. The U-FE Committee further suggested that a tour of Steamboat Springs could be built into the schedule by having small groups learn to navigate the bus system and ride it through town with the guidance of their Orientation Leader. The administrator on the U-FE Committee stated, "[Have] them hop on the bus system, learn how to use public transportation." This would help establish a relationship with other students, assist in getting acquainted with town, and provide an opportunity for students to learn how to navigate public transportation so they feel more comfortable getting around town.

Future Research

This study was designed to understand students' perceptions of their academic and social preparedness after attending the orientation program at CMC, as well as to improve the program for the future. There are additional studies that could provide further understanding of and improvements to orientation programming.

1. This study could be replicated at other CMC campuses that offer orientation programming. The study would need to be tailored to each campus, as each orientation program is different. This would allow a larger-scale of results to make generalizations about student retention and preparedness college-wide. In similar, future studies, it would be beneficial to collect additional demographic information as part of the questionnaire, as there could be some differences in the perceptions of preparedness in various student populations.
2. Another study that could be conducted would be a study of the control group that does not attend SOAR. This could effectively look at how this group did academically, their perceptions of preparedness, and how they retained. Further, it would be interesting to correlate individuals in the group to the profile of a student who attends June SOAR versus August SOAR.
3. An evaluation of the goals and relationship of the SOAR program and College 101 class required of all students under the age of 21 with less than 24 credits should be conducted. This evaluation could assess the similarities and differences between the goals of the programs, information delivered, and outcomes. Further, it could examine whether these two programs could be designed to run in tandem

to spread the information for new students over a longer period of time and run as an extended orientation program.

4. Once multiple-measures are used to assess course placement in lieu of placement testing is established, it will be important to look at course success and completion rates to determine whether multiple-measures are successful for placement. Student comfortability and perceived success could also be incorporated in a mixed-methods study. This study would help inform placement testing during orientation and may influence future students' perceptions of their academic preparedness.
5. It would be beneficial to conduct a study in regards to orientation, retention, and what students listed as their initial goal at CMC. This study could pull data about students' original goals, such as receive a degree from CMC or to take classes for transfer. Data could then be pulled to see if the student accomplished the initial goal, took a different path (e.g. stayed at CMC when they were planning to transfer), or stopped-out. Students who attended orientation and those who did not could be compared to determine if that has any impact on goal attainment. This study could be used to make decisions regarding what to cover during SOAR, as well as internal recruitment and planning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to conduct a Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) of the Student Orientation and Registration (SOAR) program at the Steamboat Springs campus of Colorado Mountain College. This study specifically focused on

students' perceptions of their academic and social preparedness after attending SOAR and opportunities to enhance the program.

Three primary methods of data collection were used to gather the necessary data to conduct this study. The first method was the anonymous questionnaire that was distributed to SOAR participants at the end of the program. The second method was general demographic and retention data provided by the Institutional Research (IR) Department. The third and final method of data collection was the U-FE Committee meetings conducted as part of the framework of this study. These three methods of data collection provided rich information from which the findings of this study were derived from.

The findings related to the first research question regarding students' perceptions of their preparedness fell into three broader categories of combined preparedness, academic preparedness, social preparedness. Findings included: (1) students who attended SOAR were more likely to retain at CMC than those who did not, (2) students believed that academic planning heightened their level of academic preparedness, (3) students believed that interacting with peers, faculty, and staff heightened their social preparedness, and (4) students believed that connecting with the campus heightened their social preparedness. The findings related to the second research question specifically focused on future enhancements to the SOAR program based on student experiences. Findings in this area included: (1) information overload made the SOAR experience overwhelming for students and (2) there were many opportunities for program

enhancement in regards to academic planning, interaction with people, interaction with place, and the SOAR schedule.

Recommendations made in this study were based on the findings of the data collected. Recommendations for improvement included: (1) require orientation for all new students, (2) change the format of the SOAR program, (3) tailor the information provided, (4) offer off-campus students an alternative orientation, (5) create more opportunities for academic planning, (6) create additional opportunities for peer engagement, and (7) offer tours of campus and town to students.

Since the U-FE methodology employed by this study is use-based, it is the intention that the end product of the evaluation is useful to CMC to assist in improving the SOAR program at the Steamboat Springs campus. Through the findings and recommendations of the study, changes can be made to the SOAR program to improve the student experience and students' perceptions of preparedness, perhaps leading to more prepared and confident students and potentially improving campus retention.

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Appendix A

Orientation Program Formats

Program Format	Description
Summer Orientation Programs	Summer orientation programs are the most common model of orientation programming with nearly 86% of all institutions using this method (Mann et al., 2010; Deggs et al., 2011). Summer orientation is designed to bring students to campus prior to matriculation for a period between one to three days. This is often the first opportunity for an institution to inform students of what is expected of them and what resources are available to them. During these programs, students are introduced to a variety of the institution's academic and social climates. The exact structure of these programs differs at each institution; however, many campuses make the summer orientation programming mandatory, meaning that a student will not be able to enroll until they have attended an orientation session (Mann et al., 2010; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Mullendore & Banahan, 2005).
Fall Orientation Programs	This approach to orientation brings new students to campus in the days right before the semester starts. These programs typically last between one day and one week. This model is mostly used at smaller institutions and often provides more about the social culture of an institution than the academic culture. Similar to summer programs, fall programs will vary from campus to campus, however one commonality among fall programs is that they often do not include class registration, as the timing is too close to the start of the semester (Mann et al., 2010).
Summer/Fall Orientation Hybrid	Some institutions deliver orientation in a way that combines the summer and fall orientation models described above. In the hybrid model, institutions will bring student to campus during the summer for academic advising and course registration. They supplement this piece of orientation by offering programming about the social culture and college life immediately prior to the start of the term (Mann et al., 2010).
Off-campus Programs	To assist out-of-state students, some colleges will offer orientation programming in different geographical regions at a local community college or high school. This demonstrates to out-of-state students their importance by saving them money on travel expenses, saving them time, and offering a more flexible option (Mann et al., 2010).
Online Orientation	Online orientation programs tend to cater to transfer and non-traditional students. In this model, all orientation information, including academic and social cultural information are offered online through a virtual meeting, prerecorded videos, webinars, virtual presentations, and/or phone calls. Online orientation can be the sole model of orientation or can be used in conjunction with other orientation formats. (Mann et al, 2010).
Family Orientation	Familial involvement has been cited as an important component of orientation, as families are often uncomfortable with sending their child to a new environment, want their questions and concerns addressed, and want to know how to best help their students succeed. Orientation can help families understand what will be expected of their student, what they should expect from the institution, a basic understanding of student development, and the changes in their roles and relationships with their student (Robinson et al., 1996; Mullendore & Banahan, 2005; Koch & Gardner, 2014; CAS, 2014).
Summer Bridge Programs	Summer bridge programs are often meant to provide a highly structured transition from high school to college for students who are at a greater risk of not succeeding in their first year, particularly students from low socio-economic backgrounds and historically marginalized populations (Koch & Gardner, 2014). Summer bridge programs often last for several weeks and are meant to be an immersive academic experience to students, in additional to residential living, developing time management and study skills, the opportunity to network with peers and college faculty and staff, and creating a familiarity with campus resources and services (Barefoot et al., 2012; Koch & Gardner, 2014).

Appendix B

Schlossberg's Theory of Transition and Orientation

Theory of Transition

Nancy Schlossberg

Schlossberg defines the foundation of her theory as stemming from the analysis of human adaptation to transition (Evans et. al, 2010). She posited that adaptation to transition can be affected by three things: (1) the individual's perceptions of the transition, (2) characteristics of the pre-transition and post-transition environments, and (3)characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition.

Schlossberg also suggests that there are three components to the transition process: approaching change, taking-stock, and taking-charge (Evans et al., 2010).

Evans, N., Forney, D., Guido, F., Patton, D., & Renn, K. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Appendix C

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Orientation

Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner

Ecological Systems Theory is a prominent psychological theory which posits that "an individual's development occurs through complex interactions between an individual and the people, objects, and symbols in that person's surrounding environment" (Longe, 2016, p. 346).

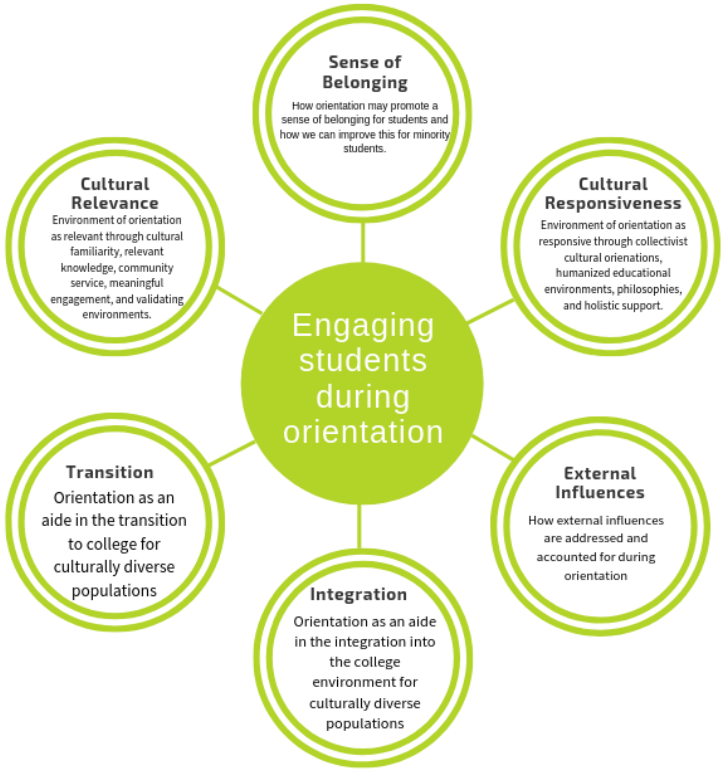
Bronfenbrenner created a system that he described to work like a Russian nesting doll where different subsystems are situated inside each other. These subsystems are: (1) the microsystem, (2) the mesosystem, (3) the exosystem, (4) the macrosystem and (5) the chronosystem (Longe, 2016).

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Longe, J.L. (Ed.). (2016). *The Gale encyclopedia of psychology.* Farmington Hills, MI: Gale.

Appendix D

Museus's Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model and Orientation



The CECE Model

Samuel Museus

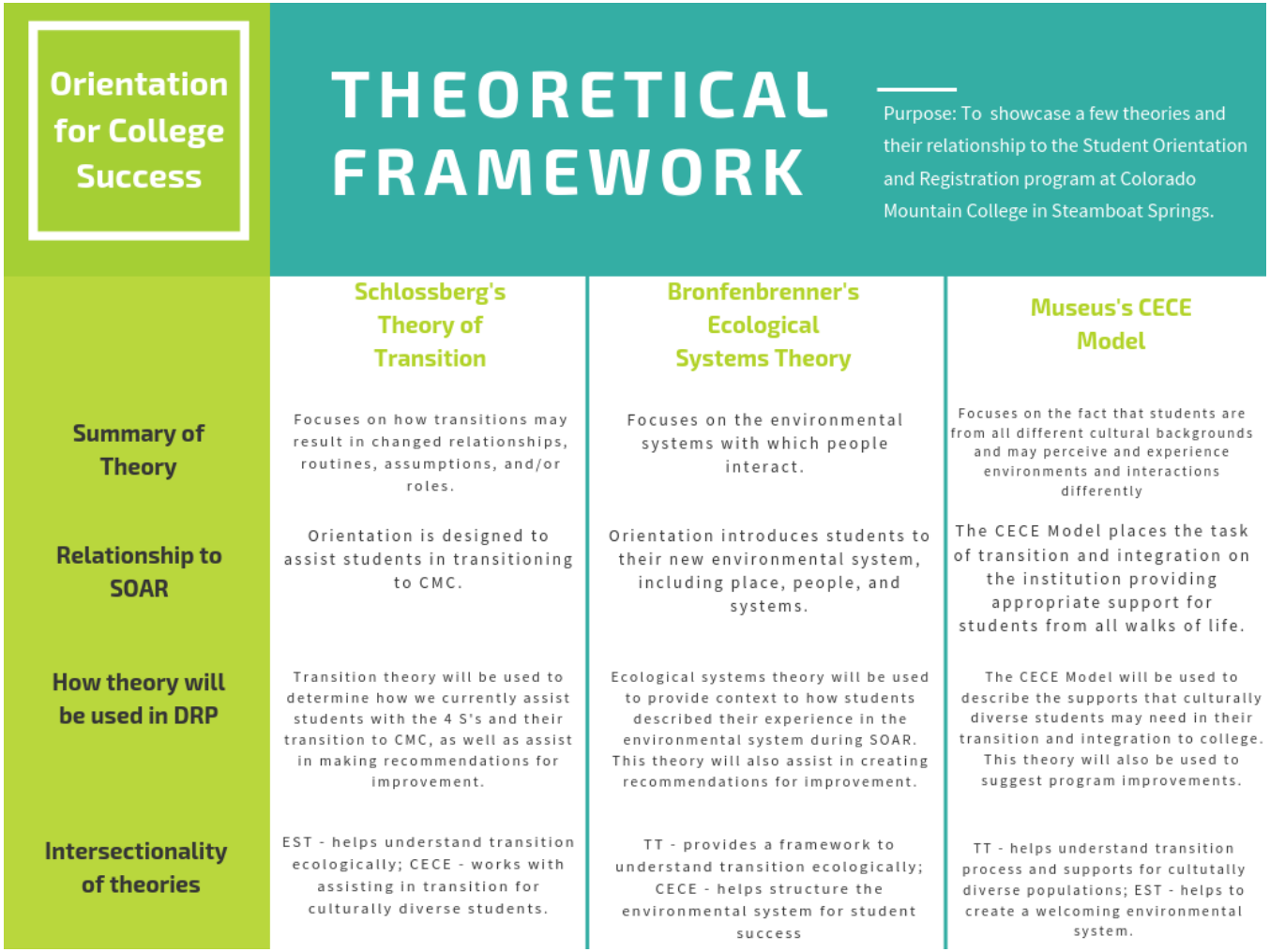
Museus (2014) created the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model to offer a new way to think about student success outcomes for racially and ethnically diverse student populations. In his theory, Museus (2014) explains that external influences, culturally engaging environments, and a sense of belonging lead to student success outcomes.

The CECE Model specifically focuses on culturally engaging environments citing nine indicators of a culturally engaged campus. These indicators include: (1) cultural familiarity, (2) culturally relevant knowledge, (3) cultural community service, (4) meaningful cross-cultural engagement, (5) culturally validating environments, (6) collectivist cultural orientations, (7) humanized educational environments, (8) proactive philosophies, and (9) holistic support (Museus, 2014).

Museus, S.D. (2014). The Culturally Engaged Campus Environments Model: A new theory of college success among racially diverse student populations. In M.B. Paulson (Ed.) *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* . New York: Springer.

Appendix E

Intersectionality of Theories: The Ecology of Transition



Appendix F

2018 June SOAR Schedule

SOAR: Student Orientation and Registration

Thursday, June 21, 2018

9:00 am - 10:00 am	Check-in for SOAR	Hill Hall
10:30 am – 10:45 am	Welcome and SOAR Overview	Allbright Auditorium
10:45 am – 11:45 am	Student Break-Out Session	Various Locations
11:45 am – 12:45 pm	Lunch	Dining Hall
1:00 pm – 2:40 pm	Student Break-Out Session	Various Classrooms
2:45 pm – 3:15 pm	"Tell Me Something I Don't Know"	Allbright Auditorium
3:15 pm – 3:45 pm	Student Break-Out Session	Various Locations
4:00 pm	Placement Testing Group A	Bristol 319 & 321
5:00 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.	Dinner	Dining Hall
6:45 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.	Hot Springs Pool Party	Hot Springs
9:00 p.m. - 11:00 p.m.	Pizza & Games	Hill Hall

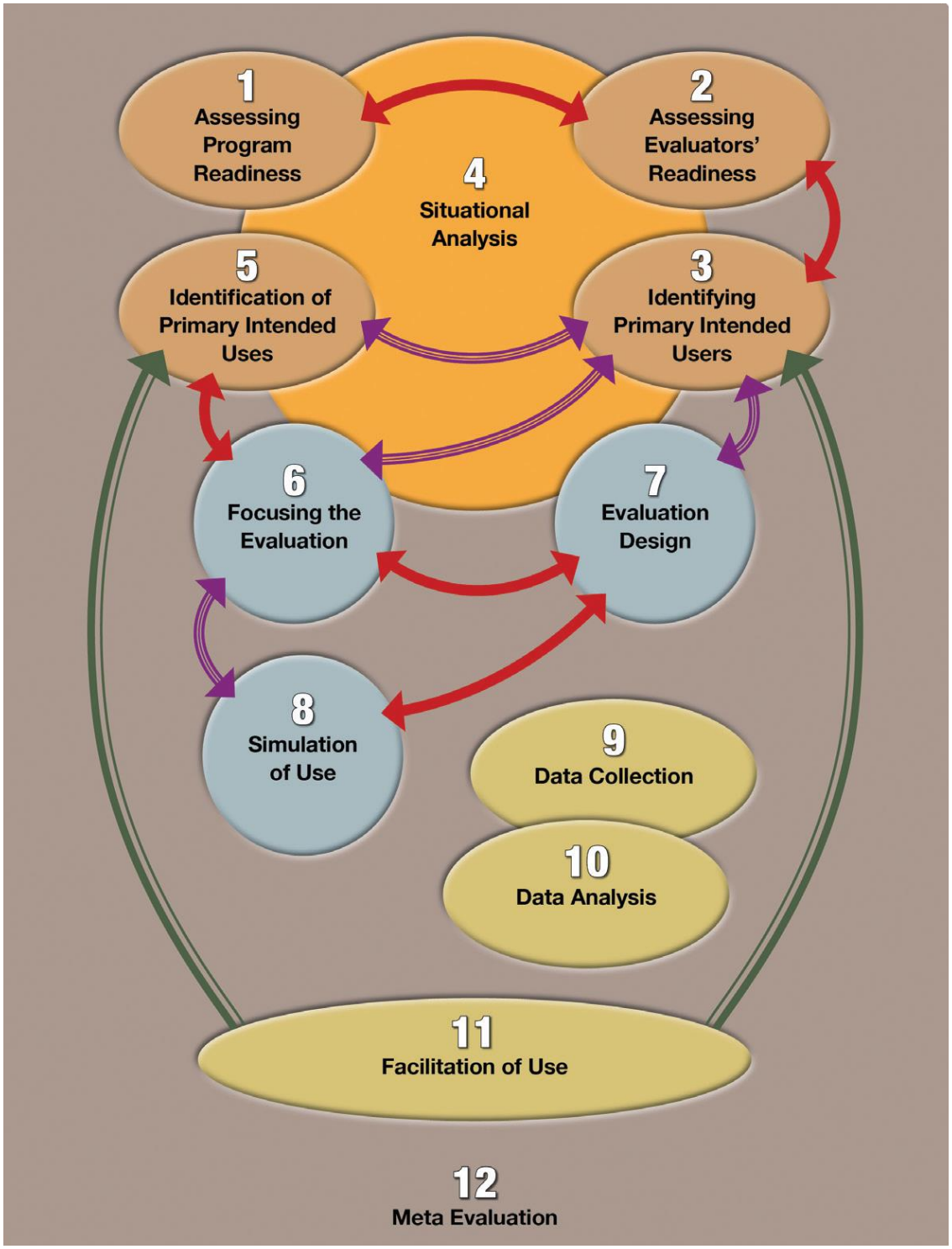
Friday, June 22, 2018

7:00 a.m. - 8:00 a.m.	Breakfast	Dining Hall
8:30 am	Placement Testing Group B	Bristol 319 & 321
11:00 am – 11:30 pm	SOAR to Academic Success	Allbright Auditorium
11:30 am – 12:30 pm	Lunch	Dining Hall
12:30 pm – 5:00 p.m.	Advising and Registration (Attend Advising Appointment and then proceed to Academic Building Front Desk)	Academic Center

***Students are required to attend all sessions**

Appendix G

U-FE Process Model (Ramirez & Brodhead, 2013)



Phase One – Identify Stakeholders

Step One: Assessing Program Readiness

- Evaluator provides active and skilled guidance to determine if program is ready to be assessed
- Define intended users and uses of the evaluation with primary stakeholder

Step Two: Assessing Evaluators' Readiness

- Evaluator and manager must review their skills and their willingness to collaborate

Step Three: Identifying Primary Intended Users

- Primary intended users should have an identifiable stake in the evaluation and its use
- Users will be required to engage with the evaluation through the entire process
- The evaluator assesses who the users are and their objectives and needs.
- The evaluator must establish a climate of participation with the users

Step Four: Situational Analysis

- The evaluator must review organizational aspects including (1) previous evaluations, (2) resources available to conduct the evaluation, (3) priority given to the evaluation, (4) the relationship of the program to the overall organization, (5) whether or not key issues are being addressed, and (6) contextual aspects of the program.

Phase Two – Focus of the Evaluation

Step Five: Identification of Primary Intended Uses

- Use of the evaluation is the goal of U-FE, so the evaluation must be useful
- Identify how the evaluation will be used.
- Uses should be identified at the start and will guide the evaluation questions and methods.

Step Six: Focusing the Evaluation

- Construct a set of manageable evaluation questions with users for the evaluation

Phase Three – Methods, Design, and Measurement

Step Seven: Evaluation Design

- Selection of methods should be based on data needed to respond to the questions the users have identified
- The evaluator must ensure the methods will yield findings in relation to the intended uses of the evaluation

Step Eight: Simulation of Use

- A test-run for primary users
- A simulation of potential use should be completed with fabricated findings to verify that the expected data will lead to useable findings.
- Modify evaluation questions if necessary

Step Nine: Data Collection

- Data collection should be managed with use in mind
- Primary users should be involved

Phase Four – Actively Engaging Stakeholders in Findings

Step Ten: Data Analysis

- Done in consultation with primary users
- Involvement will increase users' understanding of the findings
- Should add to the users' ownership and commitment to utilization

Phase Five – Making Decisions on How to Move Forward

Step Eleven: Facilitation of Use

- The evaluator must be committed to facilitating the use of the evaluation
- Facilitating use should include making connections with the findings and the original uses
- The evaluator and primary users should create and prioritize recommendations to improve the program moving forward and how the strategy will be implemented.
- This step is central to U-FE and requires a lot of time and resources to be done well

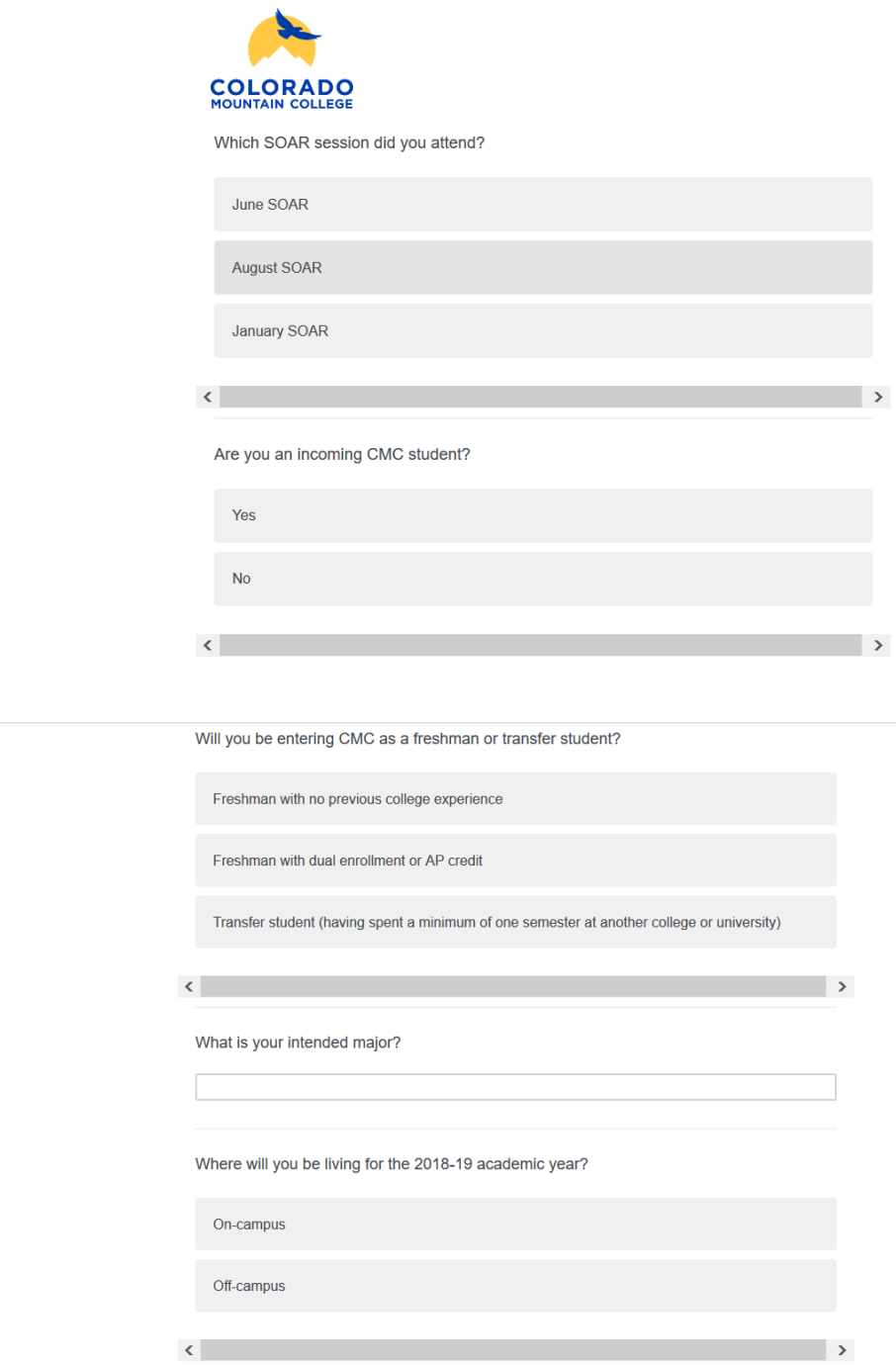
Step Twelve: Meta Evaluation

- U-FEs are evaluated by whether or not the users use the evaluation in the intended ways
- This step tells the "story" of how the U-FE process worked, evolved, and allowed users to learn from their experience

Graphic: Ramirez & Brodhead, 2013
U-FE Process (Phases and Steps):
Adapted from Ramirez & Brodhead, 2013; Christie & Alkin, 2013; Patton, 1978

Appendix H

SOAR Questionnaire



COLORADO MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

Which SOAR session did you attend?

- June SOAR
- August SOAR
- January SOAR

Are you an incoming CMC student?

- Yes
- No

Will you be entering CMC as a freshman or transfer student?

- Freshman with no previous college experience
- Freshman with dual enrollment or AP credit
- Transfer student (having spent a minimum of one semester at another college or university)

What is your intended major?

Where will you be living for the 2018-19 academic year?

- On-campus
- Off-campus

COLORADO MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

Select the three words that best describe your experience during SOAR.

Exciting	Valuable	Challenging
Smooth	Welcoming	Nervous
Successful	Sufficient	Negative
Prepared (to enter CMC)	Confusing	Anxious
Positive	Overwhelming	Scary

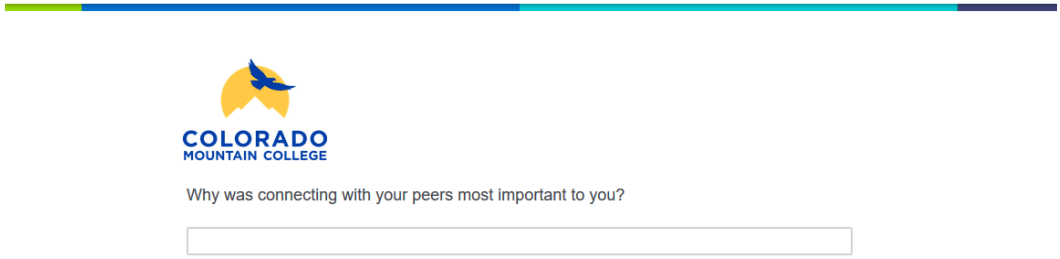
Please explain why you selected these three words to describe your SOAR experience.

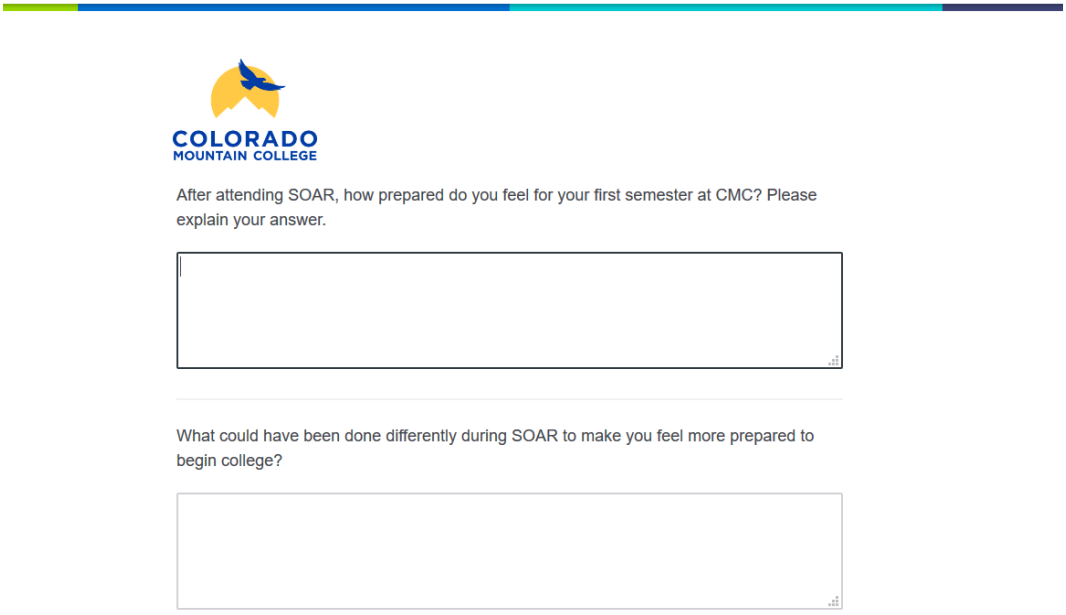
COLORADO MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

Please rank the order of tasks you completed at SOAR in order of importance (1 being the MOST important, 10 being the LEAST important):

- [ ] Connecting with your peers
- [ ] Connecting with your academic advisor
- [ ] Connecting with a CMC staff member
- [ ] Registering for classes
- [ ] Finalizing financial aid and payment
- [ ] Learning about campus resources
- [ ] Evening activities (hot springs and games)
- [ ] Eating in the dining hall
- [ ] Accuplacer Placement Testing
- [ ] Setting-up your Basecamp and email accounts

Sub question: Why was […] most important to you? [ONLY 1 OF THE ABOVE ANSWERS WILL POPULATE - Next question will ONLY be what is selected as number 1 answer in previous question]





COLORADO
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What is your biggest fear in starting your first semester at CMC?

What is one expectation you have of CMC to help in your transition to college?

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What was your favorite part about SOAR and why?

What can we do to improve SOAR?

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We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.
Your response has been recorded.

Appendix I

U-FE Committee New Orientation Format Proposal

June & August – REGISTRATION SESSIONS
August – ORIENTATION

JUNE Registration

Day One (Student):

8:00 am – 8:30 am	Check-in for students who need to take the Accuplacer
9:00 am	Accuplacer Testing
11:00 am – 12:00 pm	Check-in for all other students
12:00 pm – 12:45 pm	Lunch
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm	Break-out Session o Break out into assigned groups o Ice-breaker Activities
2:00 pm – 3:30pm	Rotating Stations o Financial Aid & Payment o Web Account Set-up and Navigation o Academic Program Q & A o Student Life Q & A
3:30 - 5:00 pm	Open Stations o Campus Tours o Rotating stations will be open and available to assist students with the specific areas they need additional assistance
5:00 pm – 6:30 pm	Dinner
6:45 pm	Evening Activity
9:00	Evening Activity

Day Two (Student):

8:30 am – 9:30 am	Breakfast
10:00 am – 10:45 am	Faculty Session
11:00 am – 11:45 am	Academic Session (Divided by major)
11:45 am – 1:15 pm	Lunch
12:15 pm – 5:00 pm	Registration (assigned one-on-one appointments)

AUGUST Registration

Day One (Student - M):

8:00 – 8:30 am	Check-in for Students who need to take the Accuplacer
8:30 am	Accuplacer Testing
9:30 am – 12:30 pm	Move-in for all August students
11:30 am – 1:00 pm	Lunch
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm	Breakout Sessions o Break out into assigned groups o Ice-breaker Activities
2:00 pm – 3:30pm	Rotating Stations o Financial Aid & Payment o Web Account Set-up and Navigation o Academic Program Q & A o Student Life Q & A
3:30 - 5:00 pm	Open Stations o Campus Tours o Rotating stations will be open and available to assist students with the specific areas they need additional assistance
5:00 pm – 6:30 pm	Dinner
6:45 pm	Evening Activity

Day Two (Student - Tu):

8:30 am – 9:30 am	Breakfast
10:00 am – 10:45 am	Faculty Session
11:00 am – 11:45 am	Academic Session (Divided by major)
11:45 am – 1:15 pm	Lunch
12:15 pm	Registration (assigned one-on-one appointments)
6:45 pm	Evening Activity

ORIENTATION – for both June and August participants

Day One (Student – W; Returners Th):

9:00 am – 12:00 pm Move-in for June Participants
11:30 am – 12:30 pm Lunch
12:30 pm – 1:15 pm Small Group Activity
1:30 pm – 3:30 pm Rotating Topics
- Support Services
- Financing
- Student Life (Clubs & Activities)
- LMP

3:45 pm – 4:15 pm Video
4:15 pm – 5:00 pm Residence Life Session
5:00 pm – 6:30 pm Dinner
6:45 pm Evening Activity

Days Two & Three (Th & F)

A variety of Welcome Week activities focused on connecting students to each other and to the campus will be offered. Formal schedule to be determined in conjunction with the Student Life Department.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- Parents
  - What will their time/schedule look like?
  - How do we account for parents during Registration vs. Orientation?
  - Cost of feeding them for both
  - Where do we place more focused parent info?
- Local Students
  - Should we have a condensed, one-day orientation focused on local students right after registration opens (late April/early May) and before faculty are off contract?
  - Should cost for this event be less or do we keep it the same to be fair?
    - Could offer 'discounted' price
    - What would this look like in RegOnline?
- CA/RA Orientation Staff Training
- Activity Ideas

Appendix J

PRAXIS Deliverable

Prepared by Jacki Brazill
Enrollment Services

COLORADO
MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

THE ORIENTATION PLAYBOOK

A Guide for Improving Student Orientation & Registration at the Steamboat Springs Campus

COLORADO
MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

COLORADO MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

CMC is a postsecondary institution, covering a district of 12,000 square miles through the Western Slope of Colorado. CMC offers both Associate and Bachelor degree programs at 11 different campuses throughout the Rocky Mountains. Three of CMC's campuses are residential, providing a more traditional college experience, while the other eight campuses are commuter sites. CMC is an open enrollment institution, servicing traditional and non-traditional students with a wide array of pre-collegiate experience (Snapshot, 2018). Of students enrolled in credit courses college-wide, nearly 80% of students are from communities within the CMC district, 12% are from other parts of Colorado, and 8% are from out of state (Campus Portrait, 2017).

THE STEAMBOAT SPRINGS CAMPUS

Steamboat Springs is a resort community located in northwest Colorado where the ski and tourism industries drive the economy. The Steamboat campus is the northern most campus of CMC, located approximately two hours from CMC's district offices in Glenwood Springs. The degree programs offered at the Steamboat campus are driven by the local community and include Ski & Snowboard Business, Resort Management, Restaurant Management, Sustainability Studies, and Business Administration degrees. In the 2016-17 academic year, the Steamboat Springs campus enrolled 2,656 students, accounting for 16% of the total enrollment of the college and making Steamboat the largest residential CMC campus (Campus Portrait, 2017). The Steamboat campus services both traditional and non-traditional degree-seeking students, as well as members of the Steamboat community who are looking to take classes for pleasure. In 2016-17, 56% of students at the Steamboat campus were enrolled in credit classes (Campus Portrait, 2017). That same year the Steamboat campus enrolled 68% of credit students from the CMC district, 17% from other areas of Colorado, and 15% from out of state (Campus Portrait, 2017).

THE STUDENT ORIENTATION & REGISTRATION PROGRAM

"[Orientation helped me] feel prepared to take on college, my only hope is that I make a lot of friends and create a healthy balance between school, work, social life, and personal goals throughout my year."

-SOAR Participant

The SOAR program was designed to prepare students for their transition to college. SOAR was a two- or three-day, overnight experience in which new students participated in activities to get acquainted with the institution, their peers, staff members, and faculty. Students also received information about support services, met with an academic advisor, and registered for their fall semester classes. CMC Steamboat offered three SOAR sessions over the course of the 2018-19 academic year: sessions in June and August for the fall term and a session in January for the spring term. The participants in the SOAR program were mostly of traditional college-going age. All new students to CMC who lived on-campus and/or were under 21 years of age with less than 24 college credits were required to select one SOAR session to attend. Students were required to register and pay for SOAR at least two weeks prior to the event.

The overarching goals of SOAR included preparing students to begin their semester and assisting them in having a general understanding of and connection to CMC. SOAR was geared towards facilitating a connection between students and their peers, staff, faculty, and place. The tangible items that students walked-away from SOAR with were a schedule of classes for the upcoming semester, a plan for payment, and their technology accounts set-up. Furthermore, after attending orientation, students should have had an understanding of what would be expected of them as students in the classroom and as a member of the CMC community, familiarity with student life policies, knowledge of their degree program, and awareness of support services and resources on campus. Finally, the hope was that students also walked-away with a sense of community, a feeling of excitement, and connections to their peers, staff, and faculty.

ORIENTATION PROGRAMS

Colleges/ Universities that offer orientation in the United States:

96%

(Barefoot, 2005)

The first orientation program was offered in:

1888

(CAS, 2014)

Students who reported believing orientation was important to collegiate success:

74%

(Deggs et al., 2011)

Integrating students into the social and academic fabric of an institution is essential to student retention and success (Tinto, 1987). Many higher education institutions are helping students achieve preparedness by offering new student orientation programs. Orientation programs are designed to facilitate student learning and experience through the transition process, academic integration, and personal and social integration (Robinson, et al., 1996; Koch & Gardner, 2014). To achieve this experience, orientation often incorporates academic programming, campus information, and social activities to set the stage for a new student's first year of college.

STUDENT PREPAREDNESS

Due to the desire for a college degree, more students in recent years are applying for college with weaker preparation (Gray-Nicolas, 2017). A student's decision to persist to graduation can be explained in part by levels of preparation for the college experience (Lamperez & Dereshiwsky, 2016). It is important to consider both the academic and social preparedness as determining factors of college-readiness. To be college-ready, students must meet college-level academic standards, have the ability to make social connections, and understand how to self-manage what will likely be a new and unstructured lifestyle compared to high school. A lack of information, guidance at school, and personal support, as well as inadequate academic preparation, lack of rigorous coursework, and insufficient linkages between high schools and postsecondary institutions can lead students to be underprepared for college both academically and socially (College Preparation, 2006; Gray-Nicolas, 2017).

Students entering a 2-year college who need remedial education:

63%

(CollegeBoard, 2011)

College instructors who are satisfied with the level of preparation among freshmen:

35%

(Acheive, 2015)

Students who reported believing high school prepared them for college:

53%

(Acheive, 2015)

THE STUDY

A study was designed and conducted to assess and improve the Student Orientation and Registration program. The study employed the Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) model to complete an evaluation of the program, specifically exploring students' perceptions of their academic and social preparedness to enter college after attending SOAR. The study was conducted during the summer of 2018. Student data was collected via an anonymous questionnaire at the end of the June and August SOAR sessions. Additional data was collected from reports from CMC's Institutional Research Department and stakeholder meetings.

THE PARTICIPANTS

There were 160 students who participated in SOAR for the 2018 fall semester. Participants were generally traditional-aged college students between the ages of 18-21 with 96.25% of participants in this age range. Of the 160 attendees, 127 students (79.38%) lived on campus for the academic year, 25 students (15.63%) lived locally with a parent or guardian, six (3.75%) were over 21 but chose to attend SOAR, and two students (1.25%) who were under 21 opted to live off-campus and take classes part-time. Out of all SOAR participants, 107 (66.88%) identified as male and 53 (33.13%) identified as female (CMC, 2018). SOAR participants hailed from 25 states, however approximately 75% of all participants were from Colorado. The participants were predominately Caucasian, with 135, or 84.38%, students self-identifying as white. This was followed by 18 students (11.25%) who identified as Hispanic, two students (1.25%) reported they were Native American, two students (1.25%) reported that their race and ethnicity was unknown, 2 students (1.25%) identified as Asian, and one student (0.63%) reported being of Hawaiian or Pacific Islander descent (CMC, 2018).

UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION

What is U-FE?

U-FE is an evaluation model that was created by Michael Patton in 1978. The model is designed to evaluate a program with first-hand stakeholder input with the ultimate goal of intended *use* by the *users* (stakeholders). There are five major phases that must take place in a successful U-FE evaluation: (1)identifying stakeholders, (2) develop the focus of the evaluation, (3) involve the stakeholders in methods, design, and measurement, (4) actively engage the stakeholders in understanding the findings of the evaluation, and (5) making decisions on how to move forward (Christie & Alkin, 2013).

Why U-FE?

SOAR involves many stakeholders at CMC; SOAR is one of the few programs on campus that involves and engages with every single department in some way. Since part of the focus of the evaluation of SOAR was to make recommendations to ensure SOAR is both academically and socially preparing students, it was crucial that this evaluation be useful, requiring stakeholder input and a commitment to use the evaluation. The more collaboration that took place between the evaluator and stakeholders who are invested in SOAR, the more successfully the recommendations will be implemented and used, therefore creating a better and more tailored experience for new CMC students.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

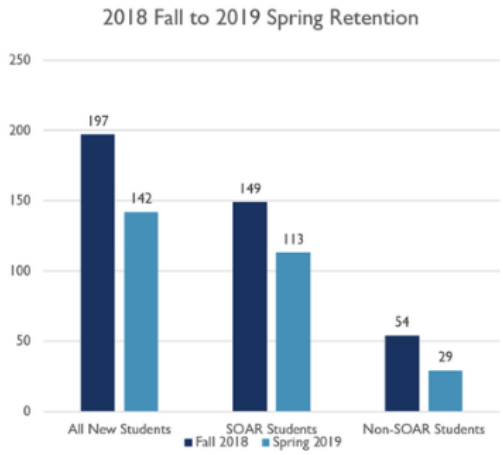
"Student transition to college continues to be an area of investigation and an on-going challenge to various audiences on college campuses."

-George Kuh

The findings of this study fell into four broader categories:

1. Combined Preparedness
2. Academic Preparedness
3. Social Preparedness
4. Program Enhancements

FINDING ONE: RETENTION



> *"We're all thinking about retention at this point because our numbers are not going up... [we] have numbers that show that retention is...correlated with [orientation].*
>
> *–Faculty member on U-FE Committee*

This data also specifically looked at new students who attended orientation compared to those that did not for the fall 2018 semester. From the group of 149 orientation students that actually attended CMC, 113 retained from the fall to spring, which is a retention rate of 75.84%. This is on par with the annual national average. The remaining 54 new students in the fall semester were not required to attend orientation because they were either over 21 years old or transferred 24 credits to CMC. From this population, 29 enrolled in the 2019 spring term, leading to a retention rate of 53.7% for non-SOAR students.

While there is a plethora of reasons which lead to student retention, including academic and social factors, the data presented here suggests there may be a link between attending SOAR and retaining enrollment at the Steamboat campus of CMC. We cannot definitively say that orientation is the reason why these students stayed at CMC; however, we can see that it may be one of many influences of retention as the rate of retention for students who attended SOAR was 22.14% higher than those who did not. This suggests that SOAR may be helpful in preparing students for their first semester at CMC, perhaps making them more likely to stay for the second semester.

FINDING TWO: ACADEMIC PLANNING

Under the umbrella of academic preparedness, academic planning is something students indicated would help them feel more prepared for their first semester. For the purposes of this study, academic preparedness included class registration, advising, degree program information, placement testing and web account set-up.

Student participants indicated that academic planning assisted in their preparedness because it allowed them to have an understanding of what was going to be expected of them academically and set the expectation of what their first semester would be like. One participant said, "I now have a good idea of what my fall semester is going to look like, and I'm feeling more confident." Another concluded that the rotating topics especially assisted in feeling prepared, stating "I really enjoyed the session on day two when we learned about signing up for classes, text books, transportation, etc. They explained everything so well and I really felt like I understood the materials they were giving us."

> *"[Planning] helped me decide the way I would like to go about obtaining my degree."*
>
> *– SOAR Participant*

FINDING THREE: INTERACTION WITH PEOPLE

Student participants indicated relationships with peers, faculty, and staff were an essential part of their orientation experience. Students indicated that connecting with their peers and connecting with their academic advisor were two of the top three most important activities during SOAR. Out of all participants 37.5%, indicated that connecting with a peer, faculty member, or staff member was the most important activity during orientation and 50%, indicated that some form of interpersonal interaction was their favorite activity during SOAR.

Student perceptions across the board indicated that connecting with their peers, faculty, and staff helped them feel prepared for their first semester at CMC. One participant summarized the feelings of preparedness by stating, "I am more prepared than I ever could have thought because I have had so much help from advisors and I got to get to know the town, the people, and the lifestyle a lot better." Another participant described the connection to students and staff as the reason for feeling most prepared: "I feel very prepared and ready to start the school year. I feel closer to the students and the staff."

FINDING FOUR: INTERACTION WITH PLACE

Student perceptions of the environmental impact on their social preparedness included the campus environment, the environment of Steamboat Springs, and being away from home. 13.82% or participants described their interaction with place during orientation as impacting their level of preparedness for the fall semester. Students felt that attending orientation prior to the start of the semester gave them the opportunity to learn their way around campus, understand the atmosphere, and experience and become comfortable with the environment.

Multiple student participants acknowledged that SOAR allowed them to feel comfortable with their new environment, which helped them feel prepared to enter CMC. Students described learning their way around campus, knowing where resources were located, and having a better idea of what to expect from the atmosphere as reasons that allowed them to feel comfortable. Students further indicated that experiencing the campus environment was extremely valuable during the orientation experience to help them prepare for the fall semester.

FINDING FIVE: INFORMATION OVERLOAD

The most common feedback for improvement students provided was that too much information was crammed into SOAR, leading them to feel overwhelmed. When asked to select the three words that best described their experience during SOAR, 15.13%, chose the word 'overwhelming'. The SOAR program was designed to provide the information and tools for students to be successful at CMC, which encompasses many topics. While a large number of students indicated the information provided was helpful in allowing them to feel more prepared, other students found the volume of information given during SOAR was excessive and left them overwhelmed. The most common types of responses included statements such as, "there was way too much information to remember" and "there is a lot of information to digest."

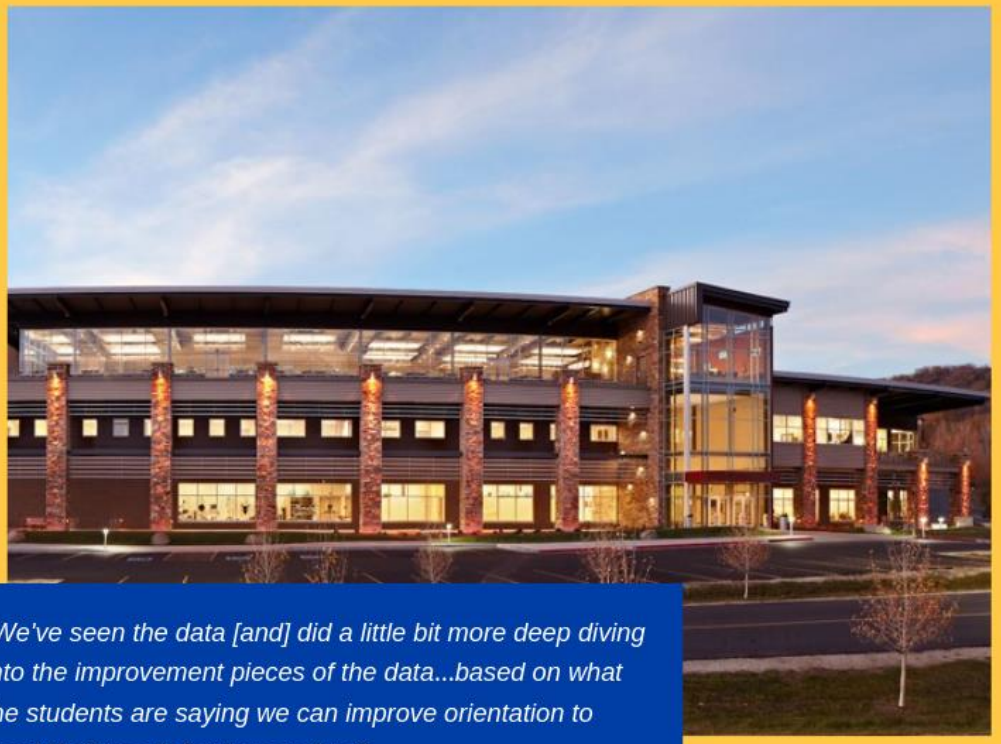
This data suggests the SOAR program may be overloading students with too much information, making the orientation experience overwhelming. Students indicated the information was too cumbersome for the allotted time frame and the sheer volume. Thus, enhancements in this area could potentially create a less overwhelming experience for students.

FINDING SIX: ENHANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The suggestions for enhancement mirror the previous findings, with suggestions under the categories of academic planning, interaction with people, and interaction with place, as well as additional considerations. The data in this finding strives to further answer how student experiences can enhance the SOAR program. Topics that should be considered for enhancement include:

1. The registration process
2. Providing assistance with web accounts
3. More one-on-one advising
4. Providing additional degree information
5. Offering additional social activities
6. Changes to orientation groups
7. Offering campus & town tours
8. Differentiating between on-campus and off-campus students
9. Placement testing
10. The timing of the orientation schedule

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT



"We've seen the data [and] did a little bit more deep diving into the improvement pieces of the data...based on what the students are saying we can improve orientation to meet their needs for preparation."

-Enrollment Services staff member

The findings in this study suggest that there are many parts of the SOAR program that students perceive as being effective in helping prepare them to be a student at CMC. Conversely, there are several changes that can be made to improve the student experience during SOAR. The nature of the Utilization-Focused Evaluation framework used in this study allows the U-FE Committee to help drive and inform the recommendations for improvement of the SOAR program.

The recommendations have been formulated from a compilation of the findings of this study, U-FE Committee recommendations, and best practices in orientation programming derived from the literature. The recommendations are organized by starting with loftier, big-picture changes that will have the highest impact. The scope of the recommendations narrows to the easily attainable recommendations towards the end of the section.

ORIENTATION FOR ALL

FACE-TO-FACE ORIENTATION

Students who attended SOAR retained for the next semester at a rate of 22.14% higher than those who did not attend SOAR. This data, along with literature, suggests that SOAR may be one of many factors that led to retention (Astin, 1984; Deggs et al., 2011; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Miller et al., 2002; Soria et al., 2013).

ONLINE ORIENTATION

ORIENTATION VIDEOS

Requiring some form of an orientation program for all new students may positively impact retention at the Steamboat campus of CMC. Orientation does not necessarily need to be offered to all in the format of the SOAR program, but could be offered via abbreviated in-person sessions, online in real-time, a series of produced videos, and/or a hybrid of these modalities.

CHANGE THE FORMAT OF SOAR

The SOAR program is currently designed in the format of a Summer Orientation Program. The findings of this study suggest that perhaps the Summer/Fall Orientation Hybrid would better serve the students. In this format, students would come to campus over the summer to complete part one of orientation, which would consist of academic advising, course registration, and establish connections with peers, faculty, and staff. All students would be expected to move to campus prior to the start of the term to complete part two of orientation, which would consist of academic and social policies and procedures, more in-depth information about services on campus, set expectations for the semester, and allow further opportunity for connections with peers (Mann et al., 2010).

Changing the format of SOAR will include creating a new schedule (page 15). The proposed schedule changes directly address the feedback provided by students in the following ways:

01

ACADEMIC PLANNING

To accommodate students' desires to have more time planning their degree, the proposed schedule offers added major-specific sessions. These sessions will focus on the specific degree students have chosen, information that pertains to the group, and the path to graduation and beyond. It also introduces students to the faculty members specific to their area of study.

02

INTERACTION WITH PEOPLE

The schedule changes create additional opportunities for peer interaction, as desired by students. It allows more time for small group activities, as well as two all-inclusive evening activities. Furthermore, since students will have a group session with their faculty advisor and peers in their program, it will allow students to work through the more process-oriented information as a group, creating more meaningful time to connect with their advisor during their one-on-one advising session.

03

INTERACTION WITH PLACE

A campus tour is included as an open station in the proposed schedule. The U-FE Committee has proposed that tours are available for an hour and a half period for students and families. Additionally, there will be off-campus evening activities that will include either a scheduled bus tour of town on the way to the activity or an Orientation Leader acting as a guide taking students downtown.

04

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

The proposed schedule works to spread the information out over a longer time period. It requires students to learn about a few topics, including registration, academics, financial aid, and web accounts during the registration period. Additional topics, including support services, financing, and student life, would be covered during the orientation period a few days before classes begin. The spread of this information may be helpful for the students who attend registration in June, however for the students that attend in August it is still going to be a lot of information to digest in a short amount of time.

05

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

This first additional consideration that the proposed schedule addresses is placement testing. Since students indicated they had a lot of down time if they did not have to placement test, the U-FE Committee suggested having the students who are in need of placement testing arrive first and all other students arrive later in the day. This also addresses the schedule changes requested for a large population of students, allowing their SOAR experience to start later.

PROPOSED SCHEDULE

June & August – REGISTRATION SESSIONS

JUNE Registration
Day One (Student)
8:00 am Check-in for Accuplacer students
9:00 am Accuplacer Testing
11:00 am Check-in for all other students
12:00 pm Lunch
1:00 pm Break-out Session (ice-breakers)
2:00 pm Rotating Stations
3:30 pm Open Stations/Campus Tours
5:00 pm Dinner
6:45 pm Evening Activity
9:00 pm Evening Activity
Day Two (Student)
8:30 am Breakfast
10:00 am Faculty Session
11:00 am Academic Session (by major)
11:45 am Lunch
12:15 pm Registration (one-on-one)

AUGUST Registration
Day One (Student)
8:00 am Check-in for Accuplacer students
8:30 am Accuplacer Testing
9:30 am Move-in for all students
11:30 am Lunch
1:00 pm Break-out Session (ice-breakers)
2:00 pm Rotating Stations
3:30 pm Open Stations/Campus Tours
5:00 pm Dinner
6:45 pm Evening Activity
Day Two (Student)
8:30 am Breakfast
10:00 am Faculty Session
11:00 am Academic Session (by major)
11:45 am Lunch
12:15 pm Registration (one-on-one)
6:45 pm Evening Activity

August Orientation

For all June and August Registration participants

Day One (Student)
9:00 am Move-in for June Participants
11:30 am Lunch
12:30 pm Small Group Activity
1:30 pm Rotating Topics
3:45 pm Video
4:15 pm Residence Life Session
5:00 pm Dinner
6:45 pm Evening Activity

Days Two & Three (Student)
A variety of Welcome Week activities focused on connecting students to each other and to the campus will be offered. Formal schedule to be determined in conjunction with the Student Life Department.

TAILOR THE INFORMATION

Since students felt that they were on information overload during their SOAR experience, it would be helpful to disseminate information over time as opposed to all at once. The proposed format and schedule change previously recommended would allow information to be spread-out a bit more and compartmentalized. Additionally, it would behoove CMC to implement an online component to orientation. An online orientation would be beneficial in several ways: (1) it could be supplied to all incoming students, not just those who are required to attend SOAR, (2) students would have access to refer back to the information, and (3) it would allow students to get some basic needs such as setting-up and navigating their CMC web accounts accomplished ahead of SOAR. If students are prepared when entering orientation, the program can focus on preparing them for the semester instead of processes (Mann et al., 2010). Additionally, this would allow students to receive information in another way, as well as further spread-out the in-take of information.

OFFER AN OPTION FOR COMMUTERS

One of the findings of this study involved off-campus students' perceptions that the SOAR program was designed for students coming from out of the area and living on campus. As the research points out, commuter student needs differ from residential student needs, which should be taken into account in the design of the SOAR program (Silverman et al., 2008). While commuter students are often local to CMC and may have taken classes during high school, they still need to attend orientation and receive the necessary information to promote their success. The U-FE Committee concluded that having a separate orientation for local area students would be mutually beneficial to the students and to CMC. It was suggested that CMC could offer an orientation session to locals before they even graduated from high school, giving them the opportunity to register early and saves them time. This is beneficial for CMC because it is an incentive to recruit our local students to attend CMC and gets them in the door earlier. In creating a separate orientation option for commuter students, CMC would need to ensure that they were still invested in connecting with other students by encouraging them to attend Welcome Week activities, or perhaps activities during other orientation sessions.

ADDITIONAL ACADEMIC PLANNING OPPORTUNITIES

Students want more opportunities for academic planning, including more one-on-one time with their advisor, more information about their degree programs, and clarity in the registration process. All of these items can be accomplished by changing the advising and registration process during SOAR. Assuming that the program format is changed as previously recommended, there would be ample opportunity to provide students with degree-specific information and one-on-one advising time.
This could be accomplished through a hybrid of group and individual advising for all students.

Ideally, advisors could meet with all of their advisees as a group to go over the basics of the program and then take more one-on-one time with students to get to know their goals instead of focusing on explaining the basics repeatedly. This would save the advisors from having to repeat themselves, but also allow students the opportunity to be in a group with their peers and spend more meaningful one-on-one time with their advisor.

The previously proposed schedule has a time slot specifically for an academic session in which students would be divided into their majors to receive general curriculum, schedule recommendations, and an opportunity to ask questions in a group setting. This would be followed-up with an individual appointment during the registration process later that day where students could discuss their schedule and academic goals with their advisor in a one-on-one setting.



OPPORTUNITY FOR PEER ENGAGEMENT

While students indicated that they enjoyed the opportunities they had to interact with peers during SOAR, they also indicated that they wanted more opportunities to engage with and get to know their peers. This can be accomplished by adding more ice-breaker activities, changing small groups more frequently so students have the opportunity to interact with multiple groups of students, and/or adding more off-campus activities to the schedule (CAS, 2014; Mann et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2002; Soria et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, changing the format of orientation would allow more peer engagement, as there would be opportunity for this in both parts one and two of orientation. To successfully facilitate additional peer engagement, it is essential that the Orientation Leaders are well-trained and comfortable leading and creating engagement among their small groups (Soria et al., 2013).

OFFER TOURS OF CAMPUS & TOWN

Students indicated that they wanted more formal tours of campus and of Steamboat Springs to better connect with the institution and the area, which are notions supported by literature. The U-FE Committee unanimously agreed that tours of campus should be integrated into the SOAR schedule, ensuring that everybody gets a chance to participate in a tour. The U-FE Committee further suggested that a tour of Steamboat Springs could be built into the schedule by having small groups learn to navigate the bus system and ride it through town with the guidance of their Orientation Leader. The U-FE Committee suggested, “[Have] them hop on the bus system, learn how to use public transportation.” This would help establish a relationship with other students, assist in getting acquainted with town, and provide an opportunity for students to learn how to navigate public transportation so they feel more comfortable getting around town.

RECOMMENDED FUTURE STUDIES

This study was designed to understand students' perceptions of their academic and social preparedness after attending the orientation program at CMC, as well as to improve the program for the future. There are additional studies that could provide further understanding of and improvements to orientation programming.

01

REPLICATE THE STUDY

This study could be replicated at other CMC campuses that offer orientation programming. The study would need to be tailored to each campus, as each orientation program is different. This would allow a larger-scale of results to make generalizations about student retention and preparedness college-wide. In similar, future studies, it would be beneficial to collect additional demographic information as part of the questionnaire, as there could be some differences in the perceptions of preparedness in various student populations.

02

NON-SOAR ATTENDEE CONTROL GROUP

Another study that could be conducted would be a study of the control group that does not attend SOAR. This could effectively look at how this group did academically, their perceptions of preparedness, and how they retained. Further, it would be interesting to correlate individuals in the group to the profile of a student who attends June SOAR versus August SOAR.

03

SOAR & COLLEGE 101

An evaluation of the goals and relationship of the SOAR program and College 101 class required of all students under the age of 21 with less than 24 credits should be conducted. This evaluation could assess the similarities and differences between the goals of the programs, information delivered, and outcomes. Further, it could examine whether these two programs could be designed to run in tandem to spread the information for new students over a longer period of time and run as an extended orientation program.

04

MULTIPLE MEASURES

Once multiple-measures are used to assess course placement it will be important to look at course success and completion rates to determine whether multiple-measures are successful for placement. Student comfortability and perceived success could also be incorporated in a mixed-methods study.

05

INITIAL GOALS

It would be beneficial to conduct a study in regards to orientation, retention, and what students listed as their initial goal at CMC. This study could pull data about students' original goals. Data could then be pulled to see if the student accomplished the initial goal, took a different path, or stopped-out. Students who attended orientation and those who did not could be compared to determine if that has any impact on goal attainment. This study could be used to make decisions regarding what to cover during SOAR, as well as internal recruitment and planning.

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