Innovations

Students' Perception of the Social Orientation Program of a higher Educational Institution

*Leny Estacio, Guidance Counselor

0000-0002-9375-4252

Minerva Andres, Psychometrician

0009-0001-2109-8997

Alicia Tiglao, Psychometrician

0009-0009-8144-110X

University of Baguio, Baguio City, Philippines

Abstract : *Higher Education Institutions are faced with various challenges amidst the ever-changing environment.More so, they are expected to explore ways to ensure the provision of quality education and equip graduates with globally competitive skills. For the University of Baguio, a strategy utilized to ensure that students are assisted even at the onset of their educational journey is the social orientation program which primarily focuses on the skills essential for college adjustment. Hence, this study was carried out to explore the perception of first-year college students towards the two-day social orientation program. Using the descriptive qualitative research design, the responses from the electronic feedback form for school year 2022-2023 underwent thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the topics related to coping and physical self were perceived as the most helpful aspects. The reasons behind this perception included the realizations derived from the topics, improved self-awareness, added knowledge, and the perceived practicality of the topics. Moreover, the respondents expressed plans to utilize what they learned from the social orientation program in their college journey. In light of the research findings, further enhancing the existing module of the social orientation program would ensure that the material will remain relevant to what it seeks to address, which is the smooth adjustment of the students to college life.*

Keywords: *social orientation, college adjustment, college journey, perception, first-year college students*

Introduction

The pandemic has created extraordinary circumstances that challenged education and the right to education. Hence, UNESCO calls on the education stakeholders to make sure that education resources are used mainly to foster the interest and capabilities of learners. The organization further spurs the

educational stakeholders that the provided education continues to strengthen individual and societal flourishing amidst the global pandemic [1].

The appeal of UNESCO to the education stakeholders relates to the global goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015, particularly on quality education. The specific Sustainable Development Goal reflects the intention to equip learners with the knowledge and skills necessary for promoting sustainable development. For the United Nations, quality education is feasible through the education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, among others.On top of the challenges posed by UNESCO and UNDP, colleges and universities are called to provide strategies that address college readiness and keep students persistent in their college journey while keeping quality education in mind. The need to address these concerns is based on the observation that students who are entering the first-year level are described as learners with expectations, eager to make their own decisions and experience college life. However, in reality, college life is characterized by academic demands, social adjustments, high levels of stress, independence, increased responsibility, and college culture, among others [2-6].

In the Philippines, concerns about adjustment are far from different. A study conducted by Hernandez [7] mentioned that adjustment from high school to college can be quite overwhelming to some students. The 'newbies' face various challenges they need to overcome to carry out their new roles and responsibilities successfully. When they are able to do so, they become productive members of the university community [5]. Students who struggle to adjust, on the other hand, eventually drop out [3]. In addition to, Hernandez [7] states that students who successfully transition to college find the new environment proliferated with opportunities for physical and intellectual growth, independence, and the opportunity to interact with different kinds of people.

Considering the concern about the transition from high school to college and the continuity of providing quality education, the Commission on Higher Education [8-9] urges higher education institutions to provide informative activities and/or materials through an orientation program for incoming first-year students. The program should facilitate a smooth transition to the tertiary level, be comprehensive, encompass all information necessary for student development, be conducted regularly, and be accessible and available to all students. Thus, the provision of an orientation program for incoming first-year students could be seen as an effort of the university to look into the general adjustment and well-being of students who are newly ushered into the school community.

The University of Baguio responds to this challenge by providing its unique orientation program to assist new UBians in their adjustment to the university. The program utilizes a specific module called the UBian Survival Kit. The module contains topics that are in conjunction with the university's vision of providing

quality education by nurturing academic excellence, relevant social skills, and ethical values.

Further, the social orientation program is an appropriate platform to foster the personal development and transition of students to the new school environment. As such, the University of Baguio primarily anchored its social orientation program on the evidence-based Wellness Model of Myers and Sweeney [10]. The wellness model embodies holism as the foundation of human wellness and, therefore, implies that the different components: creative self, physical self, essential self, creative self, and coping self; interact and comprise the total human wellness. Presenting the different components through the social orientation program provides opportunities for students to appreciate the role of making positive changes and the importance of being intentional in making lifestyle decisions, particularly in the transitional phase that they are faced with.

In as much as the social orientation program of the university is carried out to assist new UBians, it will be a worthwhile endeavor to explore how the first-year college students experienced the program: what aspects were helpful; why they are helpful and how the learned aspects will be applied in their college journey. Doing so will provide insight as regards the programs' alignment with the university's pursuit to provide quality education in the context of social orientation classes, whether as defined by the university or as defined in the United Nations' sustainable development goals [2].

Literature Review

The study of Dılekmen[11] suggests that the facilitation of an orientation program for freshmen college students may enhance their adaptation to university. Duffy [12] adds that giving an orientation course is successful in improving the retention rates of the students enrolled in the course. She further mentioned that significant differences were shown in the college adjustment between the students who underwent social orientation and those who did not.

A similar study by Davis [13] also gives support to the importance of orientation for students. His study identified it as a service that will be instrumental in helping new students become accustomed to and successfully adjust to college. The same study suggested utilizing the program to empower students with the skills, knowledge, and resource information necessary for achieving successful outcomes.

Furthermore, college adjustment involves eight dimensions: demographic characteristics, achievement in the previous school, college life experiences, self-evaluation, and personal life experiences, affective state, coping strategy, social support, and relationship with parents. Beyond these factors, the general characteristics of college students belonging to Gen Z are believed to exert an influence on their college adjustment, particularly in terms of social interactions, overcoming transitions, and persevering amidst the demands of college life [14].

Relative to these, the Initial Departure Model [3] suggests that new college students have to detach themselves from their previous school community and learn to incorporate themselves into their new academic institution to transition to college successfully. Institutionalizing strategic programs and services that focus on college preparation helps address this concern [15]. In fact, orientation programs that introduce students to college life help them become familiar with the new school environment, and welcoming them into the community fosters college success [16].

In addition, Murray [17] suggests that student orientation is a necessary part of the college transition process. Through student information, incoming students are given vital information on university resources, navigation on the campus, and creating connections with co-new students, current students, and the university personnel and staff. Additionally, the online facilitation of the student orientation program has been observed as a means of connecting new students to the larger school community amidst the "now normal". However, whether the social orientation program is facilitated online or face-to-face, the programs are perceived as successful when they are seen as built on a full understanding of the needs, learning expectations, and barriers faced by first-year college students [18].

Methodology
Research Design and Population of the Study

The descriptive qualitative research design was used in the study. A qualitative descriptive design looks into the characteristics of a phenomenon [19]. In this study, the perspectives and experiences of the first-year college students during the facilitated two-day social orientation program. The population was composed of 7,513 University of Baguio first-year college students enrolled for the school year 2022-2023 from the nine schools of the university. Total enumeration of the target students who voluntarily completed the social orientation program evaluation or feedback electronic form was carried out.

Data Gathering Tool

The researchers used the social orientation program feedback electronic form, particularly the open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were crafted based on the exploration of the holistic experience of the students during the two-day social orientation program, as well as their plans regarding how they intend to apply the topics that they have learned. More so, the evaluation tool is a pre-requisite to the completion of the two-day program, which underwent the review process of the Research Innovation Extension and Community Outreach office, as part of the whole social orientation module. However, it should be noted that due

to the subjective nature of open-ended questions, respondent bias may have an impact on the collected data [20].

Treatment of Data

The data generated from the social orientation program post-evaluation or feedback electronic form was subjected to the thematic analysis steps of Braun and Clarke [21]. The initial step carried out was the familiarization of data, followed by the generation of initial codes and search for themes. Coding was reflected through the use of letters or colors, whereas the themes solely depended on the gathered responses. Once the themes were identified, they were reviewed, defined, and named. The final step of the process was the actual report writing. To ensure that the steps were appropriately followed, the derived themes were reviewed by two co-professionals in the guidance and counseling field. More so, the social orientation feedback electronic form adheres to the data privacy clause in compliance with the university's data privacy policy. It ensures the voluntary participation of students and the use of collected responses for research purposes, thus waiving the need for an informed consent form in relation to data collection.

Results and Discussion
Perceived helpful aspects of the social orientation program for college adjustment

The primary purpose for the crafting and facilitation of the social orientation program of the University of Baguio is to help first year students and transferees in their college adjustment. The survival kit is composed of topics anchored in the evidence-based Wellness Model of Myers and Sweeney [10]. This section explores the various themes captured from the responses of the participants based on what aspects of the social orientation program were perceived to be helpful.

A. Coping self

The coping self is defined by the Wellness Model of Myers and Sweeney as the dimension of wellness that helps individuals regulate their responses to life events, thus helping them overcome the negative consequences of these events. Among the topics discussed in the social orientation program under the coping self, participants predominantly identified stress management and resilience as useful for their college adjustment [23].

Repetitive stress has been associated with poor mental health; thus, finding ways to reduce or manage it has become a recommendation, even by doctors [23]. In relation to college life itself has been identified as filled with a high level of stress, further emphasizing the need for students to be familiar with coping strategies [24]. The appreciation of the participants of this topic was made evident

through their responses that elaborated on what information struck them the most: "...how to handle and understand stress"; "stressors" or "managing stress". However, some students indicated "stress management" as the most helpful topic.

Considering this finding, participants recognize that college life is not exempt from stress, and they feel supported when equipped with strategies to understand and cope with it. This realization is supported by the study of Hepburn et al. [25], which showed that practices of stress management support well-being and that when students perceive that they are competent enough to deal with college life challenges, they are more likely to display adaptability and functioning [26].

Apart from stress management, resilience was also another topic under the copying self, which was frequently cited as helpful to college adjustment. According to the American Psychological Association [27], resilience is "the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands". On the other hand, the social orientation program has defined resilience as effectual coping and adaptation amidst encountered challenges or difficulties in life [28].

The analyzed data reflected the appreciation of the topic of resilience through the repetitive identification of the topic as the most helpful to the respondents: "being resilient", "resilience", or simply typing the word "resilience. The readiness of the respondents to choose resilience as a helpful topic for college adjustment may have been heightened by the personal perception of the students towards the resilience topic. Using the concept of perception, it is suggested that our feelings towards what we are leaning towards are not the surrounding event itself but rather the perception of what we have actually experienced [29]. Based on the concept of perception, it would imply that the experience of listening and synthesizing the information on resilience fostered a positive learning experience.

B. Physical self

A topic that was also identified by many of the respondents as the most helpful to college adjustment was the physical self, particularly self-care. For the Wellness Model of Myers and Sweeney [30], the physical self is "the biological and physiological processes that comprise the physical aspects of our development and functioning". In contrast, for Singh [31], the physical self is the complex, tangible, and observable part of human beings which is used to interact with their environment.

Self-care is defined as the "ability of individuals to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health-care provider [32]. The respondents mentioned that the discussion on self-care was helpful "because I myself is lazy in doing that to

myself", or saying "...self-care because I don't know how to do that". From these responses, it can be implied that in as much as the topics about physical body care have been integrated into science subjects, these same topics have to be re-introduced to the students for them to have an appreciation of these in relation to their college adjustment. In fact, the study by Martin [33] showed that students who learn to integrate self-care into their daily lives are more able to manage the harshness encountered in college. The Mental Health First Aid USA [34] further suggests that the practice of self-care helps the individual adapt to changes and recover from setbacks.

In as much as the derived themes were on the coping self and physical self, there were a handful of students who identified the topic of resolving conflicts under the social self and the goal-setting topic of the creative self as the most helpful topics. The Connectivism Learning Theory explains why the students were bent on identifying stress management, resilience, self-care, or any of the topics presented to them as most helpful. The theory suggests that the connections derived by the respondents to their role and goals as students to the information introduced lead them to experience relevant learning [35].

Reasons why the social orientation program topics were perceived as helpful

As a noun, usefulness can refer to the benefit or advantage obtained [36]. In the context of the social orientation program, this would refer to the benefits derived from attending the two-day activity [37]. This section presents the themes derived from the cited reasons why the topics presented were helpful: obtained realizations, improved self-awareness, added knowledge, and perceived practicality of the topics.

A. Obtained realizations

Findley [38] suggests that in human life, realizations are extremely important moments. Because of these realizations, a person is able to make better decisions in the future. In the context of the social orientation program, many of the respondents claimed that specific topics made them have realizations. One of the students claimed that "the topic, referring to the essential and physical self, makes you realize not to forget to take care of yourself." Another said that, "I realized that it's important to set my goals and prioritize it". From the responses of the students, it can be observed that the realizations were unique for each student. In as much as there were similarities in how they have put their realization into writing, the commonality of having a sudden comprehension or understanding of the topic/s presented is noticed [39]. The transformative learning theory [40] can shed light on the realization derived by the respondents. According to the theory, new information can change a persons' perspective when reflection is added to the persons' knowledge or life experiences. In the context of the social orientation program, it may have been that the previous

knowledge or particular experiences of the students were paired up to what they have heard or learned in the social orientation program.

B. Improved self-awareness

From the standpoint of positive psychology [41], self-awareness is "the ability to see yourself clearly and objectively, whereas the research findings of Carden et al. [42] suggest that self-awareness "is a construct with many connotations" and has different definitions, depending on the context that it is used.

For the respondents, the topics presented in the social orientation program were seen to have enhanced their self-awareness. A student claimed that through the topic discussed, "I discovered more about myself that I had no idea". Another student said, "...because it helps me become more aware of myself and make a self-care plan", while one claimed, "I became more aware of myself and the environmental factors that are already affecting me." Self-awareness as a process shed light on the claim of many of the respondents that the topics fostered their self-awareness. As a process, self-awareness is ongoing, developing, and trainable [42]. Thus, it always goes through self-evaluation. The research finding also illustrates the identified dimensions of college adjustment, where self-evaluation, personal life experiences, and affective state, along with other dimensions, interplay to make college adjustment a positive experience [14].

C. Added knowledge

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary [43], knowledge is the "facts or ideas acquired by study, investigation, observation, or experience". Knowledge is also defined as a "familiarity, awareness or understanding of something or someone" [44]. In the context of the social orientation program, the source of added knowledge was the different topics presented.

From the responses of the students, the acquisition of new knowledge was expressed through the following statements: "...it helped me learn something new, even if it is hard, I will try it.", "it helps myself to have more knowledge.", and "Because it broaden my knowledge on how to cope with my stresses." On the whole, the acquired knowledge from the social orientation program differed for each student, however, amidst the complexity of knowledge acquisition itself, they showed the capacity to acknowledge what they have learned [44]. More so, the information processing model [45] suggests that the information we receive can be influenced by our prior knowledge, experience, and context from which we have derived the information. This model would then shed light on the disparity between the student responses as to why some of the students perceived the presented topics as new information while some did not.

D. Perceived practicality of the topics

When used as an adjective, practical would relate to ordinary activities, business, or work [46]. For a number of the students, the topics presented in the social orientation program were topics that they could readily relate to their lives as students.

This perceived practicality was gleaned from the responses of the students, such as stating, "It helps me to my college journey"-referring to the topics, or indicating "I was able to analyze my expenses" or stating, "...because I relate with the topics". How each student processed the discussed topics would again be expounded through the information processing model [45], where the distinct experiences, previous knowledge, and context influenced the interpretation of the information received.

Altogether, the respondents have differing reasons for claiming that the topics in the social orientation program are helpful in their college adjustment. It can be deduced that perception and information processing largely influenced how the different topics were interpreted or received by the students.

Intended ways of applying the aspects of the social orientation program

Merriam-Webster dictionary [47] defines application as the capacity for practical use. In education, the application phase is considered an essential part of learning. It gives opportunities for learners to apply what they have learned to new situations and connect these learnings to their lives [48]. In social orientation, the application phase is also essential; not only do the topics have application activities after each major topic, but the students are also asked how they intend to actually apply the topics in their college journey during the program evaluation phase. This section will discuss the themes derived from the responses of the students as regards how they intend to apply what they have learned.

A. Practice what was learned

To practice means that there is the intention to execute, observe, or follow what has been learned [49]. When it comes to learning, nothing is more significant than witnessing students think deeply about what they are learning, as displayed through the intentions of putting into action whatever they have learned [50].

For the social orientation program, the connection between deep learning and life experiences has been made evident through the responses of the students. One claimed that "practice is always the best way" while another mentioned "...by constantly putting them into heart and into daily practice". One student also indicated that the topics would be applied "by practicing what I've learned from this subject". Finks' Taxonomy of Significant Learning suggests that it is through application learning that other modes of learning become useful. In this sense, the decision of the students who have signified to practice what they have learned from the social orientation program have also decided to foster their learning [50].

B. Share what was learned

Many of the respondents saw that the topics in the social orientation program were not only for their own consumption but were topics that they could share with others. Share as a verb means to divide and distribute or apportion [51]. In psychology, the act of sharing releases the bonding hormone "oxytocin" in the body, which consequently increases well-being [52].

From the responses of the students, the intention to share what they have learned was expressed through statements such as: "...to share what I've learned"; "As a student, I will try to share what I've learned to the other people or students..." or "Spread the word to my Peers and classmates". The intention to share the personal gleanings from the social orientation program illustrates the sharing culture of Filipinos. From the ingredients of a dish to good fortune and learned knowledge, Filipinos never forget to share [53].

C. Keep in mind what was learned

Memory recall and retrieval systems illustrate the intention of a significant number of the respondents to "store" what they have learned and pull them out when needed. However, for information to be made into a memory, an individual has to see its value and commit his attention to it [54]. In the context of the social orientation program, it can be assumed that the topics presented were perceived as valuable by many participants.

The intention to keep in mind whatever was learned was expressed in statements such as "I will apply it by remembering what I have learned so I can use that knowledge when I need to" or "I'll keep on mind the lesson that I've learned". Tyng et al. [55] sheds light on why there are individuals who prefer to store learned information for later use. According to their study, emotion largely plays a role in the storing and retrieval of information. Emotions modulate the selection of attention such that what is retained and recalled in a person's memory relies on what the person was initially motivated to learn. In relation, since the information stored has already been connected to what was already in one's memory, recall can be easily carried out ([54]. With this, it can be said that the value attributed to what was learned in the social orientation program is the underlying reason why the information will be kept for later use.

D. Use what was learned

Use as a verb means to employ for some purpose [56]. From the standpoint of the information processing model [45], the perception that the topics can be readily used is due to how the received information was interpreted.

From the students who intend to use what they have learned readily; such statements were observed: "I intend to use what i have learned to my advantage and for self-improvement" or "I will use it into my everyday life". Some of the

responses of the students were also specific as to what or how the learned information will be used: "DEVELOP GOOD STUDY HABITS" or "practice self-care routines and healthy living", or "Be good to others and especially to yourself." The expressed intentions could be attributed to the explanation provided by the constructivist's theories of perception [57]. The theories suggest that the perception that an individual eventually holds on to is the result of the interplay between stimulus, expectations, and knowledge.

On the whole, the different intentions of the students, as regards the application of what has been learned from the social orientation program, are either influenced by perception or the interplay of several factors that affect the cognitive processing of the information or topics presented. Regardless of the underlying reasons, the connection between acquired information and the self remains evident [50].

Conclusion and Recommendations

First-year college students have various reasons why they see the diverse topics of the social orientation program as helpful to college adjustment. More so, the differing intentions as to how the students plan to use what they have learned show a unified voice in terms of acknowledging that their learnings have already been connected to their college journey; thus, they are applicable in every sense. From the findings of the study, the following are recommended:

- That the proponent/s of the module will take time to go through the research findings and assess how these can be utilized to enhance the social orientation program;
- That the support offices, particularly those that craft and facilitate student development activities, would consider the identified relevant topics and those that were not when planning for enhancement activities that target first-year college students;
- That future researchers will look into the same research topic using the quantitative research design to validate the obtained results.

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