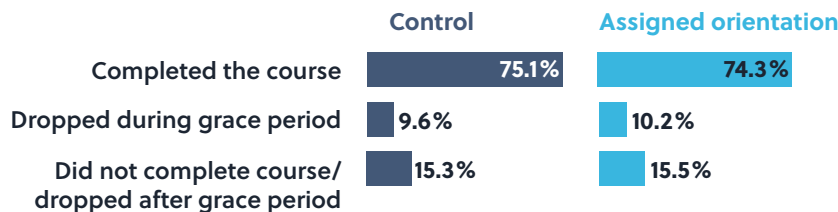


IS AN ORIENTATION THE ANSWER TO STUDENTS' ONLINE COURSE SUCCESS? **MAYBE NOT.**

Many high school students across the country are taking online courses to supplement their face-to-face courses, despite concerns about low completion rates. One frequently cited "best practice" to prepare students for online courses is providing students with an orientation to online learning. Education Development Center (EDC), the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), and Michigan Virtual formed a partnership to study the effectiveness of this strategy through a randomized controlled trial. This study examined the impact of an orientation on course completion rates for high school students taking a supplemental online course for the first time. In Fall 2018, students who enrolled in an online course with Michigan Virtual were randomly assigned to either be enrolled in the orientation, Strategies for Online Success (SOS), or to have access to typical supports. Using data from 1,781 first-time online students, this study compared course outcomes for students who were assigned the orientation to those that were not.

Overall, there were no significant differences in course outcomes between students assigned the orientation and those who had access to the typical supports.

For both groups, nearly 75% of students completed their online courses (that is, earned at least 60% of the course points), 10% dropped during the grace period, and 15% did not complete their course or dropped it after the grace period. Further, the impact of the orientation did not depend on the student's grade level, prior achievement scores, or the type of online course in which the student enrolled.



What was the orientation?

Strategies for Online Success (SOS) is an asynchronous orientation to learning online and included five components: a pre-assessment, three interactive modules, and a post-assessment geared towards preparing students for the transition from taking courses in-person to taking them online. The three modules were:

1. online learning basics
2. skills for online learning
3. online learning technology

The modules included interactive components, such as videos, card sorts, self-checks, and resources for students to download. Students were encouraged, but not required, to take SOS, which took approximately 90 minutes to complete.

Check out this video overview:
<https://youtu.be/fpUkdwE3rbE>

Approximately 55% of students who were assigned the orientation completed at least one of five components and 37% completed all components.

The orientation was encouraged, but not required for students to start their online courses. On average, students who completed the orientation had higher achievement scores on their statewide 8th grade assessments than those students

who did not complete the orientation but were enrolled in it. There were also differences in other characteristics, such as the types of courses students were enrolled in and the timing of enrollment. These findings related to implementation suggest that encouraging rather than requiring students to complete the orientation may not be sufficient to ensure that all students, especially students who are less likely to be successful in online courses, complete the orientation.

Timing of enrollment moderates the impact of the orientation on course outcomes.

In this study, a student who was enrolled in an online course prior to the official start date for that course was considered on-time. A student who was enrolled after the official start date, but before the end of the add/drop grace period, was considered late. Overall, students who were enrolled on-time were more likely to complete their online course than students who were enrolled late. While there was no main effect of being assigned the orientation on course outcomes, further analyses suggested that the timing of enrollment acted as a moderator. That is, being assigned the orientation had a different effect on on-time enrollers compared to late enrollers. For on-time enrollers, being assigned the orientation resulted in an increased relative risk of dropping during the grace period as opposed to failing the course, whereas it decreased the relative risk for late enrollers. One hypothesis is that the orientation screened out students who were not prepared to take an online course and who were enrolled in their online course with sufficient time to take the orientation prior to the course start date.

QUESTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Will your orientation improve students' success in online courses? Simply being assigned to this orientation did not improve student outcomes. However, the results raise some important questions about the content, implementation (including timing), and supplementary supports required for students to be successful in online courses.



Is your orientation optional or mandatory?

While this study examined the impact of being assigned the orientation, the findings related to implementation suggest that not all students completed the orientation and that the likelihood of completion was related to the characteristics of the students and the timing of enrollment. Online programs and schools need to identify the appropriate mechanism for delivering the orientation, taking into account enrollment patterns, and to consider whether to require students to complete the orientation prior to starting their online course.



What is the purpose of your orientation?

Online programs should determine whether having students drop during the grace period is a positive outcome of an orientation or whether the goal is to prepare all students to be successful in their online course. If it is the latter, it may be that more supports are necessary for some students.



When are you enrolling your students in online courses?

The impact of being assigned the orientation on student course outcomes differed based on whether the student enrolled in their online course on-time or late. The timing of enrollment can be due to several factors. In most schools, the onsite mentor, a school staff member, is responsible for enrolling students in online courses and they may not do so until after the school year has started. This may be due to changes in students' schedules or courses, a desire to enroll students in batches rather individually, or because of the "anytime anyplace" philosophy of online courses.



How is your orientation implemented?

While beyond the scope of this study, an orientation's usefulness may depend on the content included, the features of the orientation, whether there is a face-to-face component to the orientation, the presence of other supports provided in the school, or whether students were required to take an online course during a specific class period. This study examined a particular orientation implemented in a specific way and should not be generalized to all orientations.