

New Student Orientation at the Two-Year College: An Appreciative Approach

EMILY LONGSHORE

Midlands Technical College

ROBERT STUESSY

Midlands Technical College

For nearly 30 years, Midlands Technical College in Columbia, SC, one of 16 two-year institutions in the state of South Carolina, has provided orientation for first-time college students using various formats. Over the years, New Student Orientation (NSO) at Midlands Technical College (MTC) has become more intentionally student-focused. In order to accomplish this objective, the decision was made to use the Appreciative Advising model (Bloom, Hutson, He, 2008) to guide MTC's New Student Orientation. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief history of Orientation at MTC, an overview of the six phases of Appreciative Advising, and then share how MTC has implemented all six phases of Appreciative Advising – disarm, discover, dream, design, deliver, don't settle – into NSO. Finally, general data concerning students' overall level of satisfaction with NSO will be shared and discussed.

History of New Student Orientation at Midlands Technical College

Over the years, the college has taken several approaches to orienting new students. One of the first approaches, called "Student Orientation for Success" (SOS), was coordinated by the Office of Student Assessment during the early 1990s. It was an optional post-assessment information session. In 1999, the Office of Recruitment provided on-site admissions counseling to students in area high schools as part of a program called Post Assessment Counseling (PAC). A third approach was taken in the early 2000s by Student Information Services called "Fall Kickoff." These were on-campus events that fostered community awareness about college services, resources, and the enrollment process. All three formats were at least partially successful. However, the need to provide a more engaging, streamlined, college-wide approach to orienting new students led to restructuring the Office of New Student Advisement into the office of New Student Advisement and Orientation Services in 2007.

New Student Advisement began offering New Student Orientation programs in large groups with opportunities for students and guests to engage with other college students and college officials. The sessions provided essential information to students on financial aid and student responsibilities for success. At the conclusion of New Student Orientation, students were able to schedule their advisement appointment and/or re-take the college placement test. The format worked smoothly for students through 2011, when it became increasingly apparent that students wanted to move forward with the enrollment process during orientation. In other words, they wanted to meet with an advisor and understand their academic program plan at their orientation session.

In 2012, the team hired a consultant in the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) Master's degree program from the University of South Carolina to increase student participation

and engagement. The consultant was familiar with various student development theories, including Appreciative Advising, and suggested the use of a time management board and an opening activity to help students and guests to get to know each other and start to develop a relationship with the college. The consultant also suggested the use of an academic advising overview, whereby students would better understand the purpose of academic advising and discussing personal and professional goals. This was the first time appreciative elements were intentionally included in the planning for orientation. Since then, the NSO team has taken special care to design orientation in a way that builds positive relationships with students using the Appreciative Advising framework.

New Student Orientation (NSO) – An Appreciative Approach

New Student Orientation (NSO) for students who have been admitted for the fall at MTC, takes place on-campus during the summer prior to matriculation. This is an important time for first-time college students who are anxiously anticipating the start of their college education; students come to NSO with the expectation that MTC is going to help them achieve their dreams. Perhaps they are excited, maybe a little nervous, but most of all they expect, and deserve, to be challenged to become their best selves. In order to better support students in this endeavor, we have intentionally infused the six phases of Appreciative Advising (AA) into NSO. After a brief overview of the AA approach, the following paragraphs will outline specific examples of how NSO incorporates the phases of AA.

Brief Overview of Appreciative Advising

Grounded in theories such as social constructivism, positive psychology, and appreciative inquiry, "Appreciative Advising is a framework for delivering high quality academic advising" (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008, p. 7). "The term 'appreciative' describes both the advisor and the student uncovering and appreciating the strengths and passions that they have brought with them to the advising relationship" (Buyarski, Bloom, Murray, & Hutson, 2011, p. 77). By using positive open ended questions to uncover students' stories, academic advising creates a partnership between the student and the advisor to co-create a plan for making the student's dreams a reality (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). The six phases of Appreciative Advising are: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle. These phases are not meant to be a rigid, step-by-step process but general guiding principles for interacting with students in individual and group settings.

The underlying themes of AA provide a positive approach that can be utilized by all areas of higher education. For example, Buyarski et al. (2011, p. 75) found that "Appreciative Advising is an effective, proven framework for enhancing student success which can be applied to working with parents during new student orientation." Buyarski et al. (2011) coached parents on how to use the six phases of AA to guide and create positive relationship with their new college students, postulating that the AA framework can nurture meaningful relationships in a variety of contexts.

Disarm. "The Disarm phase is defined as recognizing the importance of first impressions while creating a safe, welcoming environment for students" (as cited in Propst Cuevas, Robinson, Clark, Hutson, & Bloom, 2011, pp. 88-89). When students enter college they can be hesitant to express themselves due to a perceived power differential between themselves and college officials. At NSO, we work hard to create a safe and welcoming environment from the moment students arrive on campus. Before students even reach the building to check-in to NSO, they are directed by clear road and sidewalk signage that leads them directly to the correct location and welcomes them to campus. When they enter the building, they are greeted by a staff member who guides them to the check-in location. At check-in, they are met with smiles and genuine expressions of how happy we are that they have arrived. They are also given MTC welcoming materials before they take a seat in the auditorium to await the start of the general session. Disarming students by creating an open and welcoming environment from the start is crucial to the overall success of

NSO. Students are more receptive to information and open to talking during the rest of orientation if they are disarmed as soon as they arrive on campus.

Discover. According to Bloom, "This phase utilizes positive, open-ended questions to draw out students' interests, strengths, and passions" (as cited in Propst Cuevas et al., 2011, pp. 88-89). NSO implements elements of the Discover phase during the general session. For example, during the general session, students and guests receive official greetings from college officials, and they hear information about financial aid, opportunities for involvement, and other academic support services. There is also time for students to ask questions about any college information that may be unclear.

The most interactive presentation during this portion is called MTC Builders Inc. and is led by orientation leaders (current MTC students). During this activity, the orientation leaders walk students through the basics of building a successful academic house. For example, the first thing needed to build both a strong house and a successful college education is a solid foundation. Students are asked to brainstorm and share ideas about what types of habits make up a solid foundation for being a successful college student. Next, they are encouraged to think about their walls of support – every well-built house needs a strong support system. Who has supported the student up until this point? Who will they lean on as they embark on their college journey? At this point, most students turn to their parents and thank them for their support. Parents are also encouraged to understand just how much their continued support will mean to their new college student.

This type of conversation continues as the orientation leaders go through the different parts of the house. Throughout the presentation, the orientation leaders share personal experiences about how they have successfully built their own academic houses and how they are still making adjustments as they go along. By engaging with orientation leaders during the MTC Builders Inc. presentation, students are discovering what it means to be part of the MTC family and how they will be able to use their strengths in this new college environment.

Dream. This phase "highlights the importance of uncovering personal...visions. While goals tend to be more concrete and objective, dreams can include visions that are much bigger, and sometimes may even be perceived as nebulous or unrealistic" (Bloom, Hutson, He, and Konkle, 2011, p. 9). Students are encouraged to dream throughout the orientation. For example, there is a table that provides literature on many of the lesser-known majors and certificate programs at MTC. At the center of this table is an eye catching banner that reads "Take. Read. Dream." This table is a centerpiece during the check-in process, intermission, and transitions from one activity to the next. At any point during orientation, students can pick up a pamphlet and read about a new career path that they had not previously considered. Many times, students will use the literature they gleaned from the "Take. Read. Dream." table to strike up a conversation with their advisor about majors other than the one they originally chose. Thus, students are encouraged to dream on their own and to then share those dreams with their advisor.

During their personalized advising session, students are asked to share their academic, career, and life dreams. This is a time for us, as advisors, to share in the excitement our students express about working towards their goals and really let them know that we support them in achieving these goals.

Design. According to Bloom, "The Design phase offers a tangible plan of action to assist students in turning their dream[s] into reality" (as cited in Propst Cuevas et al., 2011, p. 92). After students share their dreams during the one-on-one advising appointment, the advisor works with the student to come up with an Academic Program Plan that lists all of the classes the student will need to complete their chosen major. This is when students start to visualize the road map for achieving their goals and take ownership of their education.

After going over a broad overview of the student's chosen major, the advisor helps narrow down the information and discusses exact classes the student will need for their first semester. This narrowing down process also includes a conversation about the student's commitments outside of school. Many MTC students are parents and work full-time. Thus, it is important to discuss the necessity of creating a realistic plan for balancing their school, work, and home responsibilities.

Sometimes the amount of information covered during an advisement session can be overwhelming. Thus, the advisor hands each student a booklet with dates and deadlines, a copy of the classes for the first semester, as well as an Academic Program Plan that covers all the courses needed to complete the degree. These tangible items serve as reminders to the student that their dreams can become a reality.

Deliver. This phase "entails thoughtful actions taken not only to carry out the individual...plans created during the Design phase; it emphasizes the importance of personal... resilience as obstacles and challenges arise" (Bloom et al., 2011, p. 9). As an initial step in helping students follow through with the academic plan they co-created with the advisor during the design phase, students are walked to a computer lab, where they register for at least one of their classes. In the computer lab, students are assisted by a staff member (and/or they use their printed step-by-step instructions) in the process of using their MyMTC account to complete their registration. Learning how to register for their courses is one small step in carrying out the plans students made during the design phase, and gives them an opportunity to take ownership of their education.

New students are usually either overwhelmed by all of the course options or excited by the freedom to make their own schedule. During high school, students were told what classes to take and when to take them. College is the first time they have been given the opportunity to choose their own classes and times. Having gone through this transition the previous summer, the student orientation leaders provide expert scheduling assistance and reassurance to the new students who may be unsure of the schedule they have created. The orientation leader's advice during this session is invaluable. Their help is especially appreciated towards the end of the summer when many classes are already filled to capacity. The orientation leaders are able to help reassure them that everything is going to be okay and to explain the steps for seeking permission to enroll in a full class. By demonstrating a resilient attitude, the orientation leaders encourage the new students not to give up on their academic plans.

Don't Settle. "The Don't Settle phase involves challenging students to achieve their full potential by triggering a 'virtuous cycle of self-improvement'" (as cited in Propst Cuevas et al., 2011, p. 95). We hope to instill in our students the importance of continuing to revisit their dreams throughout their time at MTC. After NSO, we encourage students to keep striving for their goals by sending out timely post-orientation communications. These are a series of informative emails called Discover MTC that are sent out weekly for eight weeks after orientation. The emails are meant to remind students about resources they heard about at NSO but may have forgotten. The topics of the emails include: College is What You Make It, Information at Your Fingertips, Helping You Succeed, Surviving Your First Semester, Preparing for Advisement, How to Survive Mid-terms, Getting to Know your Instructors, and Your Next Steps. Each communication piece encourages students to be aware of upcoming deadlines and provides contact information for the various offices they may need to reach in order to register their vehicle, sign-up for classes, pay tuition bills, sign-up for clubs, change their major, view their class schedule, etc. Building on what students learned at orientation, these emails reemphasize important information and next steps students need to successfully finish their first semester and start strong for their second semester. Thus, the overarching goal of these communication pieces is to foster student persistence.

Survey Data

In order to measure student satisfaction, we worked with assessment and research planning to design a survey of NSO attendees. The questions were designed to gather students' perceptions on material presented to them at the orientation sessions. All data shared in this section come from our 2015 orientation survey. The survey was not designed to specifically assess the appreciative nature of NSO. Thus, the data should be read as a general measure of overall satisfaction.

General Session

During the general session, students heard about college services and were given the opportunity to ask questions. The 2015 orientation survey asked students to rate the topics covered during the general session on a 4 point Likert scale where 1 is poor and 4 is excellent. More than half of the students rated the topics presented as excellent (see chart 1). The mean scores ranged from a high of 3.68 for Healthy and Safe Campus to a 3.41 for Disability Services.

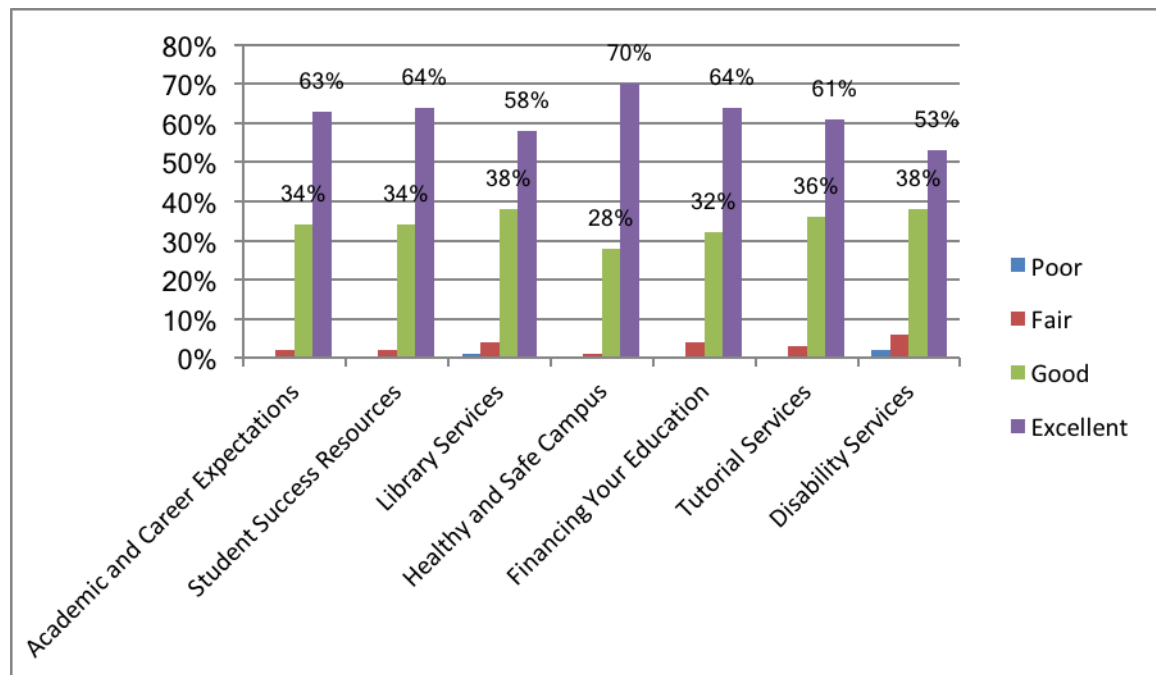


Figure 1. Rating of General Session Topics.

Advisement

When students met with their advisor, they shared their academic, career, and life dreams. This is when students began to visualize the road map for achieving their goals. The advisor explained the ins-and-outs of their major, identified courses to take for their first semester, and co-created an academic plan to achieve their goals. Students were asked to rate specific topics covered by their advisor. Students rated their experience during this portion of orientation on a 4 point Likert scale where 1 is strongly disagree and 4 is strongly agree. The mean scores ranged from a high of 3.59 for "An advisor helped you to identify the courses you need to take your first semester" to a low of 3.23 for "An Academic Advisor talked with you about your commitments outside of school (work, children, dependents, etc.) to help you figure out how many courses to take." As seen in chart 2, 61% of students said that they strongly agreed that their advisor helped them identify courses they needed to take during their first semester. The conversation about outside commitments, on the other hand, was the topic that received the poorest rating. This is most likely due to the fact that the advisement portion of orientation is designed to last no longer than

fifteen minutes, and fifteen minutes is not enough time to have a detailed discussion of every factor that plays into a students' first semester. Perhaps the outside commitments portion of the conversation would be cut short or fail to happen if the advisor felt rushed or had been bogged down by numerous questions.

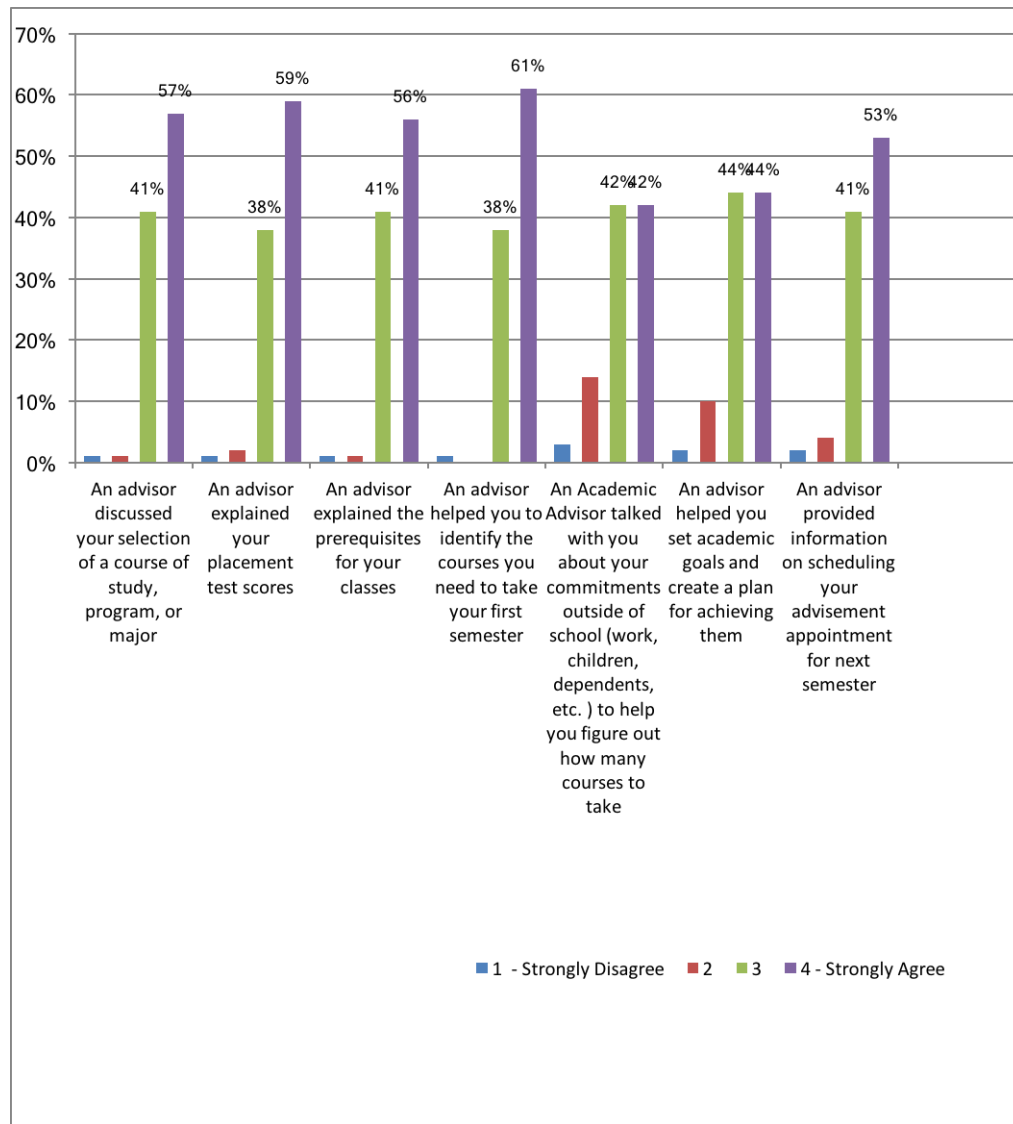


Figure 2. Rating of Advisement Topics.

Online Registration

Learning how to register for their courses is a small but important step in carrying out the plans students made during the design phase, and it places emphasis on the importance of taking ownership of their education. The survey asked students to rate their overall experience during the course scheduling and registration portion of orientation. Students were given five options for rating their experience: Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent, or Not Applicable.

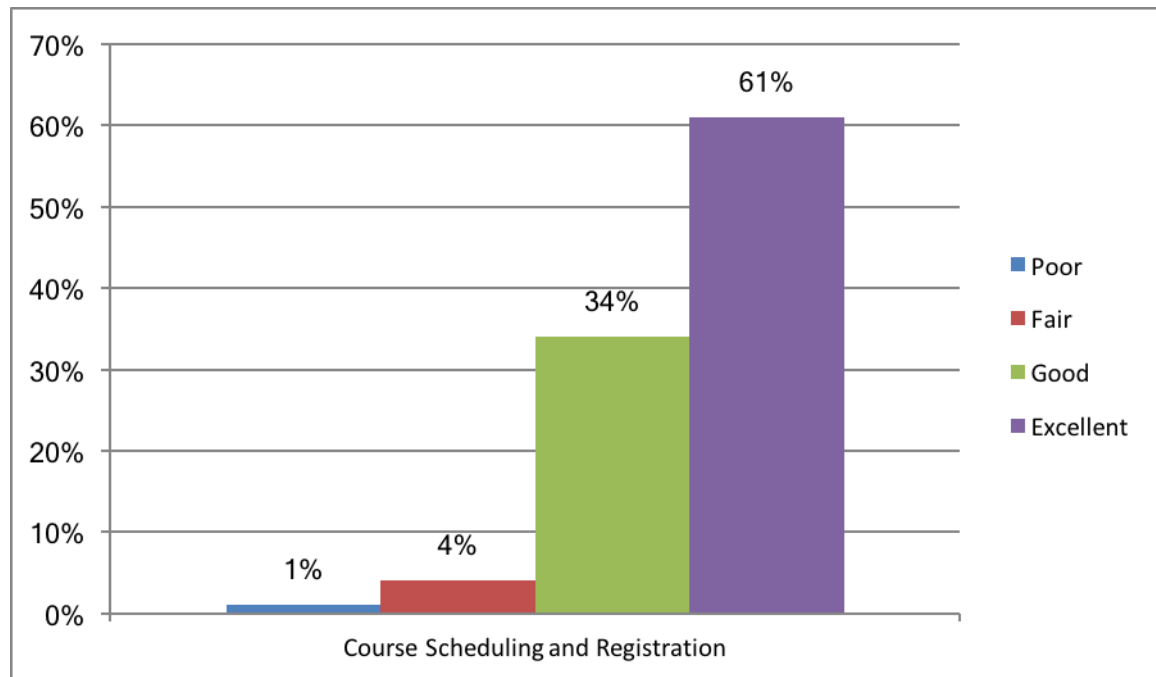


Figure 3. Rating of Online Registration.

As seen in chart 3, sixty-one percent of students rated their course registration experience as excellent and 34% rated their experience as good. Based on comments received on the open-ended portion of the survey, we learned that students felt it would be helpful to have more than two staff members assisting them. Two of the open-ended comments read, "Need more staff in registration" and "Need more computer assistance available when registering!" It was impossible to offer one-one-one help through the entire process to each student. Some students were able to successfully register on their own, while others needed more individualized help.

Overall Rating

Finally, the orientation survey rates students' overall level of satisfaction with their orientation session. The data below (chart 4) suggest that 96 percent of students thought their orientation was excellent or good. In the future, we plan to include survey items that specifically measure the effect(s) of introducing AA elements into NSO. While no such survey data were available for this paper, the general data still suggest that overall satisfaction levels were relatively high.

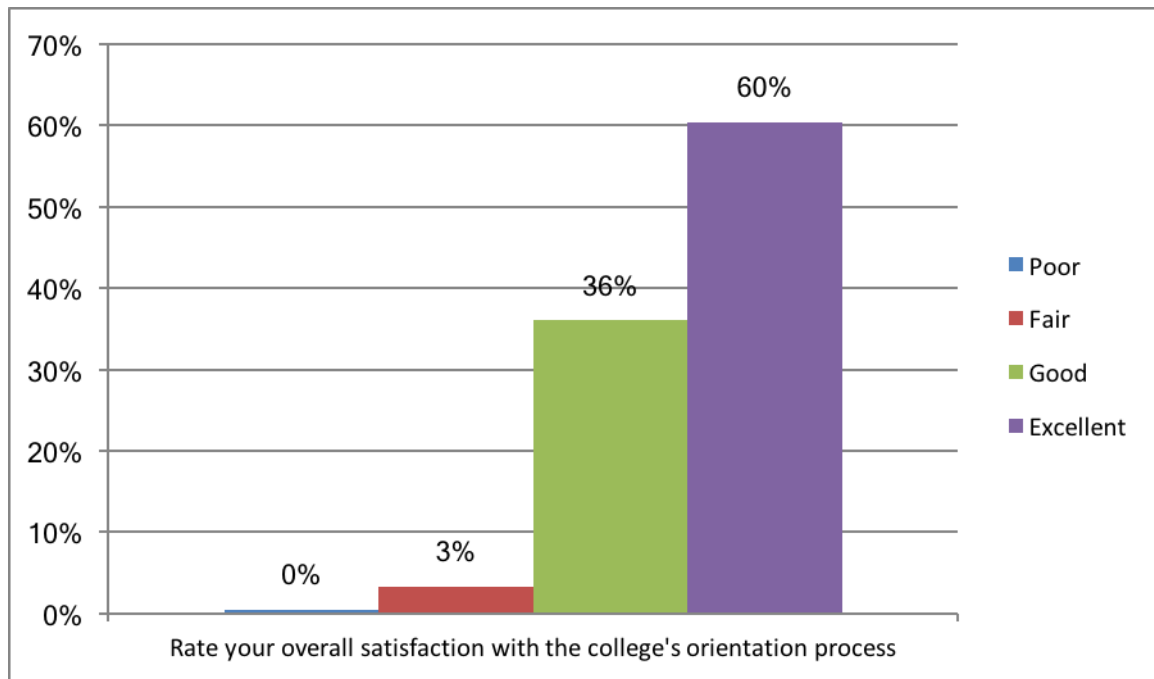


Figure 4. Overall Satisfaction Rating.

Conclusion

Utilizing the AA model in NSO at MTC provides a solid framework for ensuring that we create intentional opportunities for positive interactions with our students. It increases our ability to help students reach their fullest potential and be their best selves. We believe that elements of the AA model can be successfully implemented into orientation sessions at other colleges and universities, as well. This is a model that does not have to be completed in any particular order, and it is flexible enough to work with any type of institution of higher education and its programming. We encourage the reader to consider how they might be able to infuse elements of the AA framework in everyday practices to enhance the effectiveness of their services.

References

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