

## **The Post-SOAR Experience: Determining the Perceived Needs of Post-SOAR Participants During the Second and Third Years of College**

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*This article presents the results of a pilot study about academic and social experiences of provisionally admitted undergraduate students who participated in the University of Central Florida's Seizing Opportunities for Academic Retention (SOAR) program, a six-week summer residential opportunity designed to assist participants in their initial transition to the university. Through quantitative and qualitative analyses, coding of interview transcripts, and interviews conducted with past and present SOAR participants and staff, this article supports student retention and involvement theories, which claim that students who are actively engaged in college or university academic and social systems report the most satisfaction with their collegiate experiences.*

Transitioning from high school to college can be difficult for most students, especially for those who identify as First Time in College (FTIC), often disadvantaged by economic, cultural, and/or educational circumstances. This transition from high school to college presents challenges and opportunities which may assist or hinder these students' successes in college (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). Tinto (1993) emphasized that the process of becoming integrated into college academic and social systems involves three steps: *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*. Separation involves a students' disassociation from their past environments and communities. Transition occurs post-separation and allows students to observe where they have been in their lives, where they currently are, and where they need to be. Lastly, incorporation transpires when students are able to adopt new norms and behaviors to adjust to their new environments, a process known as academic and social integration (Milem & Berger, 1997). Once students successfully navigate these three stages, they have become integrated into their respective institutions.

Crucial to students' academic and social integration, then, are student support services and programs designed to assist with the separation, transition, and incorporation processes. Such programs are grounded in Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1993) and Tinto's

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## ANNUALS OF THE NEXT GENERATION

Theory of Student Departure (1993). Astin (1984) describes *student involvement* as the physical and psychological energy dedicated toward their academic experience in the university. On the other hand, Tinto (1975) defines *social integration* as the daily interactions and personal relationships with peers, faculty, and staff that individuals develop within their societies and through extracurricular activities. He additionally explains *academic integration* to be a communal belief in specific norms and values that are related to academic work as facilitated by students' intellectual development and academic achievement (Tinto, 1975).

Together, these theories emphasize student involvement as critical to the integration process and integral to students' abilities to identify and adapt to the context-specific norms of college and university environments (Tinto, 1993). Consequently, both theorists concur that students who complete the transition process will be successfully integrated into the university.

### *Definition of Terms*

*Academic integration* is a communal belief in specific norms and values that are related to academic work as facilitated by students' intellectual development and academic achievement (Tinto, 1975). This term often applies to *First Time in College (FTIC)* students, those who have not attended or enrolled in a postsecondary institution prior to matriculation at their present university (Florida Department of Education). Accordingly, FTIC students are often educationally disadvantaged or underprepared, denoting, those individuals who have demonstrated low performance on the ACT or SAT college admission exams, a lack of high school academic preparation, and/or high school grade point averages below minimum admission standards (University of Central Florida). Finally, *persistence* is the rate at which students who begin study at the university return for subsequent semesters (Tinto, 1975). In the case of this chapter, persistence specifically refers to the rate at which students who began as FTIC students in the summer of 2007 and 2008 enrolled for subsequent semesters in the fall 2007 and 2008.

Taken together, these terms provide a foundation for understanding the African-American student transition into and experiences within the academic and social systems of traditionally white universities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The University of Central Florida's (UCF) *Seizing Opportunity for Academic Retention (SOAR)* program is designed to assist promising, underprepared, FTIC students with their academic and social transitions to university campuses. Accordingly, knowledge about the experiences of post-SOAR students will provide student affairs professionals with the means for improving student services to meet the present and future needs of SOAR participants through the program's current curriculum. The primary purpose of this pilot study is to provide the Multicultural Academic and Support Services (MASS) staff at UCF with greater awareness as to the experiences of sophomore- and junior-level, post-SOAR students through analysis of their academic and social integration processes as well as their persistence and retention rates. This study also seeks to determine what the sophomore class of 2007 perceives as needs for their continued success at UCF, which may include, but is not limited to, additional academic assistance and/or support from career services, the UCF counseling center, additional support services, and student organization and co-curricular involvement in the university.

As such, this chapter's research seeks to address the following questions: (a) How well did the SOAR program assist post-SOAR students in their academic and social integration to UCF?, (b) What academic services and social programs do post-SOAR students perceive as necessary for their continued successes at UCF?, and (c) What does the MASS staff perceive to be the essential needs and services for SOAR students' success at UCF?

### *Theoretical Framework*

Tinto (1993) and Astin (1993) provide integrated models for delivering more effective student support programs beyond the first year of college. On one hand, integrative experiences—experiences that facilitate peer and faculty involvement, participation in student activities, and academic success—serve to reinforce retention and increases in persistence at the institution. On the other hand, experiences that are not integrated produce isolation, noninvolvement, and a failure to achieve academic goals, enhancing the likelihood of a student leaving his or her respective institution (Tinto, 1993).

#### *Astin's Student Involvement Theory*

This study makes use of Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1993) to support an integrated approach to improving the experiences of post-SOAR students. As his theory identifies student development and active student participation as integral to the learning process, Astin (1984) delineates five critical hypotheses with regard to these topics: (1) Student involvement reflects the amount of physical and psychological energy devoted to various "objects," either general or specific in nature, (2) Student involvement also takes place at various developmental levels with students demonstrating interchangeable levels of involvement with different objects at different times, (3) Student involvement can be defined both quantitatively and qualitatively, (4) The amount of learning and/or development gain that is associated with various educational searches is directly related to the student's quantity and quality of invested involvement, and (5) The effectiveness of an institution's policies or programs is directly related to the ability of the policy or program to increase student involvement.

Additionally, the theory notes that student involvement activities such as joining a fraternity/sorority, participating in extracurricular activities, playing sports, enrolling in honors programs, becoming involved in ROTC programs, researching with faculty, and working part-time on campus all produce a positive influence on students' commitment to the university (Astin, 1984).

#### *Tinto's Theory of Institutional Departure*

According to Tinto (1993), a given institution's organizational structure is not always the reason for a student's departure from their college or university. Instead, such reasons are rooted in students' cumulative college experience, otherwise known as a *meaning-making system*. These meaning-making systems are informed by an individual's culture, family, school, and community as well as more educationally oriented values—namely, assumptions and beliefs as to what to expect from college, the role of a student, and the worth of a college degree. On the whole, first-generation students have less knowledge about transitioning to college, while more privileged students may have gained knowledge about higher education from parents, siblings, or

peers. Consequently, as lower socioeconomic status (SES) students may not be encouraged to attend college, FTIC students without well-defined, meaning-making systems will likely maintain vague or inaccurate ideas about college or be doubtful as to their personal success on campus (Tinto, 1993).

As such, Tinto's (1987, 1993) Theory of Institutional Departure states that in order for students to successfully integrate into a given social system—a necessity for strong persistence rates—they must separate from past institutional affiliations to complete a successful college transition and incorporate into college systems. Tinto further elaborates on Durkheim's sociological theory of suicide to develop a model of student persistence, which identifies specific background characteristics, skills, and abilities that influence a student's commitment to their given institution and degree. This commitment, then, is connected to both academic and social experiences, formal and informal alike, which lead to multiple levels of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993).

Integrative experiences—those that entail involvement with peers and faculty, participation in student activities, and academic success—both reinforce commitment and increase persistence at an institution, which may explain why a university may focus on the concepts of social and academic integration (Paine, 2007). Noninvolvement and the failure to achieve academic goals, however, create the opposite effect, undermining commitment (Tinto, 1993). However, academic integration in the university does not necessarily imply that the student will be both academically and socially integrated (Paine, 2007).

As Tinto defines formal academic integration as grade performance and describes informal academic integration as the quality of interactions with faculty, so too does he define formal social integration as participation in extracurricular activities and informal social integration as peer group interactions (Tinto, 1993). Pascarella & Terenzini (1991), however, suggested that academic achievement can be positively affected when both informal and formal social environments receive support and encouragement. Fox (1986) found that the social integration and attrition of students was greater than persistence, while Beil, Reisen, Zea, and Caplan (1999) clarified some of the differences between academic and social integration pertaining to persistence with regard to the mediating effects of commitment. The researchers assumed that social and academic integration would not produce a direct effect on persistence like some scholars have mentioned, rather, affecting students' institutional commitment and degree obtainment (Paine, 2007).

The theoretical frameworks presented support the mission and purpose of the UCF SOAR program because each provides a lens for understanding the effects that academic and social experience has on the retention and persistence of students in the university, also providing insight into what students may require in order to be successful in college.

### The SOAR Program: History, Mission, and Educational Philosophy

The UCF SOAR program, formerly known as the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), was initiated by Dr. Robert Belle in 1980 to increase the retention and graduation rates of the university's FTIC students. The six-week, academic, summer residential program is provisionally offered to admitted students, specifically underprepared, historically low-income, educationally disadvantaged undergraduates who require additional support services to succeed in college. Throughout the SOAR program, students are required to attend two academic advising appointments, one group schedule planning session, and two academic enrichment

workshops, all of which are conducted by a collaboration among the MASS office, UCF career services, campus diversity initiatives and the Student Academic Resource Center (SARC). Once students complete the SOAR program, they more successfully matriculate into the university, having improved their writing, verbal, mathematical, social and study skills in the process, all of which are necessary to succeed in college.

The university provides admission and academic assistance to these students because UCF believes they have the greatest potential for academic and social success (see Table 1). Since 1980, more than 1,200 of these students have participated in the EOP and SOAR programs denoting, 55 students participated in the SOAR program during the summer of 2007. Out of those 55 students, 49 returned for the fall 2007 term, resulting in an 89% program retention rate, with retention defined as student enrollment through completion of the first academic year for the sake of this study. During the summer of 2008, 61 students participated in the SOAR program, with 60 returned for the fall 2008 term, a program retention rate of 98%.

**Table 1**  
*2007–2008 SOAR Program Data*

Admission Profile	2007 SOAR Cohort	2008 SOAR Cohort
Provisional Admissions Offers	128	119
Student Acceptances	61	55
Average SAT Total	895	909
Average ACT Total	18	19
Average H.S. GPA	3.48	3.40

This chart denoting displays the average standardized test scores for students in the summer 2007 and 2008 SOAR cohorts. Through such support services and programs, students have the opportunity to become more engaged and successful within the university.

### The SOAR Curriculum

SOAR participants are registered in the following UCF courses based on placement test scores: English Composition, Strategies for Success, and Fundamentals of Oral Communication (Speech), with each student able to register for up to three classes, or nine college credit hours of coursework. Each class meets four days per week for approximately two hours, with individuals required to earn a C or above in each class to continue their enrollment at UCF. This intensive program offers developmental academic support services and fosters student success and retention through a combination of intensive instructional programs, daily tutorial services, and regular advising activities. Each participant must attend a three-hour freshman seminar each Friday and also complete a minimum number of tutoring hours per class each week to satisfy the requirements of the program; failing to meet these requirements results in denial of admission to the university.

Through group activities, the SOAR program enhances the development of its participants' interpersonal and social skills, providing comprehensive and accurate UCF resources on student rights, duties, and services. The MASS office also offers academic success

## ANNUALS OF THE NEXT GENERATION

workshops and individual advising sessions as well as college- and major-specialized group advising.

Holistic learning is a key component of the SOAR program. Participants explore their different learning needs and styles, and career aspirations are incorporated into program content and activities. The SOAR program also seeks to create a learning environment that facilitates participants' transition from high school to college while simultaneously promoting the emotional, social and intellectual maturity of its participants. Some components of the SOAR program include the program overview, the UCF freshman orientation, the SOAR encounter, personal and academic advising, classes on Monday through Thursday, weekly freshman seminars every Friday, and the SOAR awards ceremony.

### Method

#### Setting

This research was conducted as a study funded by the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Scholars Program at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, FL. UCF is a large, metropolitan, predominantly white, public, four-year university. UCF has become one of the state's leaders in academics and research in a variety of fields, including optics, modeling and simulation, engineering and computer science, business administration, education, science, hospitality management, and digital media. Over 50,000 students attend classes on UCF's main campus and its 11 regional campuses, which are located throughout Central Florida. In sum, UCF has a total of 12 colleges, including the recently established College of Medicine, and College of Graduate Studies, which assists the university in promoting a diverse and inclusive environment which includes students from all over the United States and 141 countries, in addition to an ethnically/racially diverse community (see Table 2): White (66%), Indian/Alaskan (4%), Hispanic (14 %), Black/Non-Hispanic (9%), Asian/Pacific Islander (5%), and Undocumented Students (2%).

**Table 2**  
*University of Central Florida SOAR Race/Ethnic Representation*

Ethnicity	2007 SOAR Cohort	2008 SOAR Cohort
African American	35	32
Asian	00	03
Hispanic	13	23
Native American	00	00
Unknown	00	01
White	02	02

#### Participants

The sample of the SOAR Program was purposely selected to include second and third year, post-SOAR, UCF students who matriculated into the university (see Table 2). The participants in this study consisting of underrepresented minorities from the summer 2008

cohort, with the ages of the participants ranging from 18–19 years old; there were no individuals from the summer 2007 cohort. With regard to these data, it is important to know that, compared to UCF racial/ethnic populations; the SOAR program reflects a non-diverse student demographic profile, primarily serving African-American students.

Participants were informed of pilot study's purpose through an informal conversation with the SOAR coordinator. The program's coordinator and researcher scheduled a time to meet with the two participants for lunch. The researchers then explained to the participants how the participants would be contributing to the study, as well as its purpose and significance. Once participants met at the designated location to complete their interview, they were each provided with the SOAR focus group / interview consent form. There were only two participants that completed the interview. There were not enough participants to conduct a focus group.

Two post-SOAR participants, three current MASS staff members, and one former MASS staff member were contacted in person; participants were not given any incentives to participate in this study. A total of six interviews were conducted. The final sample of the interviewees included two second- year participants, three MASS staff members, the director of the MASS office, the assistant director, and the SOAR coordinator, all of which were African American. The MASS staff was asked to identify information about the SOAR program as well as the services and support that their office provides to students. A former MASS staff member, who currently works in the UCF Sophomore and Second Year Center, also participated in two interviews, both of which were with the Assistant Director of the MASS office. The SOAR coordinator also participated in two interviews.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The interviews were conducted by the co-investigator between April and July of 2009. Interviewees included three woman and three men. The interviewer explained the purpose of the research and interview procedures to participants, completed relevant readings about interview procedures, and participated in an independent research methods course which discussed data collection and interviewing strategies. Second-year post-SOAR students were interviewed during the day in the one of the Main UCF library's study rooms, with only the interviewer and single interviewee present. The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Post-SOAR participants were asked to identify their academic and social experiences in the university since matriculating from the SOAR program and their perceived needs to be successful in the university.

The MASS director and SOAR coordinator were interviewed in their offices. The Assistant Director was interviewed in an office at the Sophomore and Second Year Center Success Center. The MASS staff was asked about the history of the SOAR program, its purpose, its programmatic structure changes in the last four years, and any changes they would like to see to the program with regard to post-SOAR participant involvement. The questions listed below are samples of MASS staff interview questions: (1) How does the MASS staff help program participants' university transition?, (2) What do you perceive to be essential needs and services for post-SOAR participants after their first year at the university?, (3) What is the overall effectiveness and student satisfaction of the SOAR program?, and (4) How does the SOAR program integrate academic and social balance for students?

The data collected in this study were based on MASS staff interviews and the interviews of two post-SOAR participants. Seven interviews were conducted, five of which were from the

## ANNUALS OF THE NEXT GENERATION

MASS staff and two from the post-SOAR participants. This data was analyzed by reading the interviewee's responses and then determining the common themes throughout the entire interview process.

### Preliminary Findings

Students' post-SOAR experiences may directly correlate to their academic and social integration into the university, and ultimately, their successes. Accordingly, understanding what second- and third-year, post-SOAR participants need may play an integral role in creating more effective outcomes for SOAR students. These outcomes may include, but are not limited to, increases in persistence, retention, and graduation rates. As such, themes common to participant responses include that a sense of well-preparedness after SOAR as well as the value of weekly connections and engagement with MASS staff.

#### *Participant Perspectives: Academic and Social Integration*

Post-SOAR participants felt that the program did a thorough job in preparing them for academic and social success in the university. Both participants noted that, although the program included a very rigorous academic schedule and stressed the importance of academics, the staff emphasized the importance of connecting to various organizations on campus; specifically, minority and African-American student groups. As a result, both students have become involved in campus organizations such as the African American Student Union (AASU) and the Minority Association for Pre-Health Students (MAPS). In addition, one participant mentioned that she also volunteers with Habitat for Humanity (HFH), the College Reach Out Program (CROP), and SOAR itself.

Both post-SOAR participants continue to frequent the MASS office, visiting MASS to help out and to speak to the SOAR coordinator several times a week—often for advising appointments—but also to help other students become more acclimated to the university climate. The post-SOAR participants stated that the MASS staff is always there for them when they need to get something done. Overall, they feel connected to and engaged with the university, enjoying spending time in the office and lending a helping hand when possible.

#### *SOAR Program Staff Perspectives: Student Satisfaction, Successes, and Mentoring*

The MASS staff additionally mentioned that some students initially view the SOAR program negatively because they don't know what to expect. The program might be overwhelming to FTIC students due to its intense schedule, but in the end, students leave the program satisfied with their experience. For those students dissatisfied with the program, either they did not adequately reach out to the program and take full advantage of its services or perhaps the staff failed to address particular problem areas for the student. Regardless, the program has been very successful and retains high retention rates year after year, percentages in the upper 90s. Overall, the staff feels that the program is meeting the needs of current SOAR participants. They did, however, agree that there is limited engagement with post-SOAR students.

Every Friday after these seminars, SOAR participants participated in facilitated groups in which they completed the UCF Creed exercise. Students apply one of the five UCF Creeds—

which are Community, Creativity, Excellence, Integrity and Scholarship—discussing it, relating it to their own personal experiences, and then presenting it to the group through video, poetry, or other self-expressive means. Doing so allows participants to claim ownership of their integration into UCF and helps them realize how connected they are to the university. The SOAR participants then present this creation to their cohort and family during the SOAR ceremony at the end of the program.

### *Mentoring Opportunities*

One MASS staff member noted the potential benefits of upper-class junior and senior post-SOAR students tutoring and/or mentoring current SOAR students and other lower-class students, in which the former group could provide the latter with an overview of their program experiences. Such an opportunity could potentially invite involvement from post-SOAR participants, in the process enhancing their leadership skills and giving back to the program. Such mentoring could also assist current SOAR participants in avoiding the mistakes that their upper-class predecessors encountered. Accordingly, these lower-class participants could benefit from such advice as they complete the six-week program, simultaneously developing necessary skills applicable beyond the walls of UCF.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The common themes that are apparent based on the interviews with the MASS staff include student satisfaction, success and retention, university transition, increasing UCF diversity, and mentoring. As each staff member emphasized different themes than their counterparts—for example, one focused on the importance of mentoring and leadership while another concentrated on diversifying UCF—taken together, these different viewpoints present a powerful means of improving the SOAR program and MASS services.

Studying, time management, and involvement on campus and in the community are important for student success at any university. Students should also become involved in community service as well. The key, overall, is for students to learn how to balance school, work, and their social lives to be successful at UCF. As such, the two study participants believed that the SOAR program was their launching pad to greater involvement at the university. They also need to know how to study, what time they study best, the location at which they study best, and under what conditions. Also, it is important that students learn how to budget their time and to prioritize. Additionally, involvement with on-campus student organizations and programs is imperative, especially those catering to first-generation, low-income, and/or underrepresented students.

### *Limitations of Study*

One limitation of this study consists of research participants' varied responses to the question of what needs they perceive to be essential to success at UCF. In addition, students' lack of post-SOAR involvement may be due to the fact that they did not like the overall structure of the program, despite its myriad benefits. This rationale, then, may provide insight as to why post-SOAR participants have not returned to the MASS office, among other factors.

## ANNUALS OF THE NEXT GENERATION

Additionally, the lead author chose only to study students in the 2007 and 2008 SOAR cohorts because she was a part of the 2006 cohort and as a researcher, wanted to remain unbiased as possible. One final challenge of the study includes conducting research during the summer because many of the post-SOAR participants were either not attending summer school or were out of town.

### *Future Research*

More research is needed in this topic of academic and social integration of post-summer, second- and third-year students' in the university. Specifically, one that might necessitate a longitudinal study is the relationships between current SOAR students and post-SOAR success at UCF. The authors would also like to determine how effective the SOAR program has been to both current and post-SOAR students and to verify whether or not the program meets the needs of said current participants. If so, in what ways is SOAR doing so? Currently, the author's research seeks to explore the perceived needs of second- and third-year, post-SOAR participants, but she is also collecting data from freshmen post-SOAR students as well. These data will allow for greater comparison between the experiences of both groups of students in the university and for more emphasis on the similarities and differences between these populations.

Finally, one proposed longitudinal study would be titled the Longitudinal Study of the SOAR Program (LSSOP), designed to provide information regarding SOAR participants' successes at UCF. The study would also seek to provide information about the SOAR program's effectiveness, informing higher education policymakers, educators, and researchers about the experiences of those FTIC, low-income, and/or underrepresented students participating in summer bridge programs throughout the United States.

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