2024

Onboarding Students at Scale: A New Student Orientation Course that Prepares Students to Succeed in their Online Degree Programs

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ONBOARDING STUDENTS AT SCALE: A NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION COURSE THAT PREPARES STUDENTS TO SUCCEED IN THEIR ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAMS

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A new online orientation course equips students with the tools and skills to thrive in online programs. It welcomes them to the university, introduces the learning management system, fosters peer connection, and locates essential resources. Additionally, it teaches valuable strategies for time management, motivation, and success in online learning. This adaptable base course caters to the university's diverse online programs while maintaining a core structure. Designed for efficient facilitation by Academic Directors, it also allows for a personalized touch. Surveys indicate the course effectively prepares students for their first online course. Notably, completing the orientation has become the strongest predictor of student retention and academic success. This award-winning approach serves as a valuable example for designing online student orientation programs.

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INTRODUCTION

Students often come to online education unprepared for the realities of graduate-level work in an online modality. For many students, much time has elapsed from when they were last in a formal course of study. Students may need a refresher on what to expect and how to succeed before officially starting their courses so that they can be more prepared going into their programs rather than having to learn how to succeed on the fly, which can cause some students to drop out. The goal of the New Student Orientation was to better prepare students for succeeding in their online programs by orienting them to the resources, tools, technology, skills, mindsets, and strategies that are typically needed to succeed as an online student. The expected outcome was that students would be more prepared going into their first class after taking the orientation which would improve the student experience and set them up for success. The orientation course is asynchronous so students can start immediately upon registration to continue the momentum between registration and their first class. Academic Directors also schedule a live orientation synchronous session over Zoom to connect with students during the orientation course. The course was designed to allow students to connect with their peers and Academic Director before classes officially start. The orientation course was designed to mimic the structure of online courses students take in their programs. This way, when students take their first online class, the look and feel would be familiar to them and there would not be as big of a learning curve. Instructional designers may find this case relevant when designing onboarding programs to help students transition to taking online courses in a way that sets them up for success. The course design is described in detail to provide instructional designers with specifics that they can replicate for their own student orientation course or similar program to onboard new students to a university or academic program.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

To lay out the context for the design process, it is important to disclose the identity of the designer whose positionality influences the design as well as interrogate the assumptions and beliefs they bring to the project (Holmes, 2020). As the designer assigned to work on this project, I am a white, cis, woman with a doctorate in strategic management and a master's in education. I think it is important for me to acknowledge that while I have mostly been a successful student in higher education, I was tasked with designing an orientation for students who may struggle with adapting to traditional academic norms, due to a host of reasons including systemic barriers. The more I dig into the reasons for student attrition, the more I come to understand that academic spaces are mostly designed for people like me who are familiar with the unspoken norms and know how to play the game of school, so to speak. My goal for the orientation was to try and make those unspoken norms explicit so that students had a better idea of what to expect, while also recognizing that there are always ways to improve that aspect of onboarding. Despite my efforts, there are no doubt blind spots and gaps in my understanding of why students may struggle and what (if anything within our control) can be done about it to help them persist.

When I was assigned this project, I was new to an instructional design role. I had been an instructional designer (ID) for about 4 months before starting this project. Prior to my role as an ID, I worked at another university where my role was designing training and professional development programs for faculty teaching online. During my tenure at my previous institution, I also had the opportunity to design a new student orientation for all incoming students. I completed this project, but I took a new job before I could see the implementation or evaluation of the project. I think that project gave me some good experience as a foundation, but also did not close the loop of the ADDIE process.

One thing I regrettably did not do during the design process of this project was confer with students to get their input on the effectiveness of the course design. Instead, I made assumptions about what I thought students needed to know and do to be successful. In hindsight, this was a glaring omission that I discuss in more detail in the Challenges section.

The next section provides a detailed description of the new student orientation, the rationale for design decisions, and corresponding selected screenshots of the course.

DESIGN, RATIONALE, AND STRUCTURE

The course was designed using an adult learning framework with opportunities for self-directed and reflective learning because the audience for the course is adult learners who typically work full-time, have caregiving responsibilities,

and are over the age of twenty-five. The rationale for having the new student orientation be an asynchronous course is that this would allow students who registered for classes at different times to be part of the same course experience. The assignments and activities in the course have no set deadlines so students can complete them at any point from when they register up until one week before classes start. The asynchronous structure would also allow flexibility for students entering the program to complete the orientation at days and times that were convenient for them. Finally, a course format (as opposed to a webinar or live Zoom meeting) would give students the opportunity to get a preview of what a real course experience might be like in terms of having to review content, practice using tools in the learning management system, and engaging with peers and an instructor asynchronously. If students need help beyond getting questions answered over email, they can always meet with their instructor synchronously over Zoom as well.

The thinking behind having students take an orientation course before they take a real course is that they could learn some of the tools, strategies, and skills that will help them succeed before their first real course starts rather than learn all these things simultaneously during their first real course. In other words, this was a way to help scaffold the learning so students could go into their first course more prepared which would ideally reduce the cognitive overload that some of the stakeholders mentioned during the needs assessment where students not only had to learn the content of the course itself but also get up-to-speed with navigating the systems, tools, technologies, and resources, which can be overwhelming.

I structured the modules to follow the same consistent format as online courses students take. Just like the real online courses, the orientation course has seven modules. Students can navigate to the modules from a course menu. There are also multiple ways to navigate through the modules. Each module has a title, introduction, learning outcomes, readings, media, an activity or assignment, and a conclusion and follows the same style guide as the online courses. Again, the thinking here was that by the time students take their first real course, the structure would be familiar to them so this would allow for a smoother transition and reduce cognitive overload. Each of the modules has a peer learning activity for students to meet, network, and collaborate with peers in their program so students can get to know each other before classes start and begin building a learning community. There is a Getting Started page that includes a course overview, course learning outcomes, a syllabus, and an explanation of how the orientation is structured. This Getting Started page is like the Getting Started Page that the real online courses have. It also includes additional information about how the orientation is structured so students get an explanation and overview before jumping into the modules. Each module includes a variety of materials to engage

diverse learners including interactive e-learning Storyline presentations, self-assessments, hands-on practice activities, and reflection activities. The e-learning presentations include a transcript as well as an audio file so students can choose how they want to watch, listen, or read the content following standards for accessibility and universal design for learning. Each module also has students practice using different tools in the Blackboard learning management system such as submitting assignments, posting to a discussion, posting a blog, contributing to a wiki, and posting a journal entry so students get exposure to the different Blackboard course tools available and get hands-on practice in preparation for using those tools in real courses. Job aids are provided with written step-by-step instructions and screenshots, so students get training on how to use the tools. The Course Learning Outcomes are: Students should be able to:

- Define their motivations and goals as they relate to their academic program.
- Assess their readiness for online learning.
- Establish a plan to support their success.
- Locate program-specific resources.
- Familiarize themselves with the online course tools.
- Review academic expectations for graduate-level work.
- Identify best practices for online learning.

Module 1: Welcome

I like to begin a project like this inspired by a vision for what I hope to achieve. To get myself in an inspired frame of mind, I took a stroll on the beautiful campus while listening to some music (Enya I believe) on my headphones observing students as they shuffled by on their way to class. I remember being captivated by the vibrancy of the campus and wondering how I could translate that culture into the online version. How could I capture this vibe in text and images? It was not exactly translatable. It's like comparing swimming in the ocean to viewing a picture of the ocean. Nothing quite does it justice. For me, this was one of the most challenging parts of designing an online student orientation: Having students online feel that sense of culture and vibrancy in the online version. I tried to take that feeling I got from walking around campus and put it into words that would make students feel welcome and connected. Touring the campus sparked an idea to include information not on the campus (although I do have some images of the campus) but rather on aspects of the culture, values, history, and mission of the

university since you do not need to be on campus to appreciate and be inspired by these intrinsic aspects of the university. I emphasized the university's culture of care and invited students to reflect on how they could contribute to that culture of care in their courses. I really wanted students to be intrinsically inspired the way I was inspired by the feeling of the campus. I wanted them to be intrinsically inspired by the idea of the university, their own motivations, and forming a meaningful connection with peers. In the first module, there is a discussion board where students introduce themselves to each other so they can begin connecting with their fellow learners. See Figure 1. Students are given the choice to do a recorded video or written introduction with a selfie or image that represents them. I wanted to give students a choice in how they express themselves and perhaps the opportunity to try out a new tool. Students are encouraged to talk about their background, why they chose their program/ this university, and what they are most excited about learning. I tried to make the discussion prompts intrinsically engaging and have students put into words their motivations for going to school. It was my belief that this can help students clarify their purpose and generate enthusiasm, which can help with student retention and success. Included in the discussion board instructions is an attached job aid with written instructions and screenshots that show students how to post to a discussion board, which is helpful for those new to the learning management system. Having students learn how to participate in discussions in the orientation prepares them for participating in discussions in their first class.

Module 2: Student Resources

Every academic program has its own unique resources and nuances. I decided to include the program-specific resources and information in Module 2. The information came directly from the Academic Directors and the student retention team. The purpose of the module is to orient students to resources that they need to know about such as the Student Success Center website, Student Portal, and important contacts. This module has an interactive e-learning presentation that provides an overview of the academic program including the courses students will take and highlights a few academic policies and processes. This information was provided by the Academic Directors. In this module, students are introduced to various resources that support their success and get plugged into a networking community right at the beginning of their academic program.

Discussion 1.1: Introductions 🔗

Introduce yourself to your community of learners and let them know a bit about you, your background, edu are you nervous or unsure about? Post a selfie, avatar, or image that represents you.

FIGURE 1. Screenshot of the introductory discussion post instructions that invite students to describe their background and reasons for choosing their program and university and what they are most excited about learning.
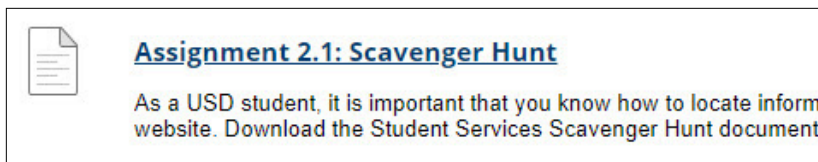
Assignment 2.1: Scavenger Hunt

As a USD student, it is important that you know how to locate inform
website. Download the Student Services Scavenger Hunt document

FIGURE 2. Screenshot of instructions for a scavenger hunt assignment for students to get familiar with the resources available to them using active learning.

Discussion 2.1: Plan for the Future

What do you believe are the benefits of receiving a graduate degree?
least two peers seeing how their goals compare with yours.

FIGURE 3. Screenshot of instructions for a discussion where students describe their plan for the future and how obtaining their degree will help them achieve their personal and professional goals.

In my meetings with the student retention team, they said that there is a new student checklist that students sometimes miss or skip before starting their classes. So, I also made this checklist an explicit activity for students to complete in this module.

The student retention team also gave me a great idea to create a scavenger hunt activity where students locate resources, they need to know about from the Student Success website (which the student retention team manages). See Figure 2. The idea was that the scavenger hunt activity would make finding resources more of an active learning activity rather than just presenting students with the resources that they passively view. Students submit their scavenger hunt activity as an assignment so they can get practice using the assignment tool. Included in the assignment instructions is an attached job aid with written instructions and screenshots showing the steps of submitting an assignment. Having students go through these steps and get some hands-on practice submitting an assignment prepares them for this workflow when they take their first class. This way students can just focus on learning the content of their courses rather than also worry about simultaneously learning tools in the learning management system.

In this module, students participate in a discussion with their peers about what their plans are for the future after they have obtained their degree as shown in Figure 3. This discussion topic allows students to further get to know their peers and break the ice as well as write their goals and plans down for others to see. Again, my goal with writing the discussion prompts was to facilitate student intrinsic motivation and connections with peers to build that culture of care within the student cohort.

Module 3: Getting Ready to Learn Online

One of the key areas to emphasize with this orientation was preparing students to learn online. For some students, this may be their first online course. And online courses, especially asynchronous online courses, are very different than in-person courses. Module 3 introduces students to what it means to be an online learner. Students begin this module by taking a self-assessment of their readiness for online learning. Then students view an interactive e-learning Storyline presentation called Getting Ready to Learn Online which goes into some of the important attributes and behaviors needed to be a successful online learner such as being self-directed, asking for help, logging into the course regularly, keeping yourself on track, reading all the materials, and participating in the course activities. This presentation also goes over the weekly due dates that courses follow to prepare students for that routine (i.e., initial discussion posts are due on Fridays so that means all the readings will need to be done at the beginning of the week. Peer responses and assignments are due Mondays). At the end of the presentation is a Self-Check with a few questions for students to test their understanding of the material in the presentation. My thinking here was having students self-assess themselves before the presentation and then answer these questions at the end of the presentation would reinforce the main points of the material. I structured Modules 3-6 the same way where first students complete a self-assessment. Then they view an interactive Storyline presentation with a Self-Check. The self-assessments serve as sort of a pre-knowledge check survey to have the students gauge where they are at. The instructions for the self-assessment say: "Please answer the following self-assessment questions. These questions are designed to help you gauge where you are at and are not graded or evaluated by an instructor." I wanted students to be comfortable answering honestly, knowing that no one would be grading their answers. I also think that having students self-assess themselves is an important skill and that it can also be a way to engage students in the material. In this module, students participate in a discussion board called "What Is Your Why?" where they share their motivations for doing their program. See Figure 4. This prompt invites students to reflect a little deeper on what is really driving or motivating them, which perhaps is a different framing than asking students what their goals or plans are (which were posed in previous modules). Perhaps some students have a deeper motivation to be role models for their kids or prove that they can tackle difficult subject matter. For the discussion, students have the option to post a video response or written response along with an image or picture that represents their 'why', giving students options to express themselves. The thinking behind this activity is

FIGURE 4. Screenshot of instructions for a discussion that asks students to discuss their motivations underlying their goals (what is your 'why'?). Students have the option to post their response in writing or video.

FIGURE 5. Screenshot of instructions for a blog assignment where students design a study plan to keep themselves organized. Students have to take into consideration the systems they will use to keep themselves on track; the days they will devote to coursework and the amount of time; an outline of how their coursework will fit into their work and personal schedule; where they will study and how they will minimize distractions; who they will inform and who they can rely on for support; challenges or obstacles and how they will overcome them; how they will reward themselves for achieving their goal; and a photo or image that represents their achievement of their goal.

it allows students to clarify their motivations for going to school which they can refer to and remind themselves of when challenges arise, and they need to push themselves. The hope here was that this activity would tap into students' intrinsic motivation by having them clarify their purpose and share it with peers so they can bond over something meaningful and personal, contributing to further building the culture of care.

Module 4: Time Management

One of the themes in talking with stakeholders was the issue of students not being prepared for how to organize and manage their time in an online program. So, I made the topic of Module 4 about time management where students can start thinking through and planning how they will organize their time to ensure they can meet the deadlines in their courses, while also balancing their personal schedule. This module orients students to set up a system that helps them be accountable and has them come up with a plan to support their success. Students begin this module by taking a self-assessment of their time management skills. There is a reading called Time Management Tips for Online Students and a sample schedule template students can use to help them plan their time. There is an interactive e-learning Storyline presentation called Time Management that introduces students to setting up a system to help them stay on track such as a calendar or planner (digital or analog), To-Do List, building a consistent routine around deadlines,

and merging their work and personal schedule with their school and course schedule. This presentation also covers identifying a good study space that is conducive to learning and free of distractions to help build good study habits. There is an open-ended question in the presentation where students describe their study space. This presentation has students reflect on their support system (i.e., the people in their lives they can rely on for support and those they need to inform such as family, friends, coworkers, supervisor, etc.). There is an open-ended question in the presentation where students describe their support system and form agreements with people in their lives so they can be successful in school. This presentation also covers anticipating and planning for obstacles that can get in the way of school such as a child getting sick and what to do when that situation arises. There is an open-ended question where students describe the challenges or obstacles they anticipate and how they will overcome them. Research has shown that when people anticipate challenges and plan for how to overcome them, they will be more likely to achieve their goals (Gollwitzer, 2014). This presentation also includes the importance of rewarding your achievements and invites students to reflect on how they will reward themselves for achieving their goals. There is an open-ended question where students describe how they will celebrate achieving their goal to help them visualize their success.

In this module, students design a study plan that includes their system to keep them on track, an outline of how their coursework will fit into their work and personal schedule, where they will study, who they will inform and rely on for support, challenges or obstacles they anticipate and how they will overcome them, how they will reward themselves for completing their goal, and a photo or image that represents the achievement of their goal. Students post their study plan to a blog using a blog tool in the learning management system. See Figure 5. This activity gives students the opportunity to learn how to use blogs which prepares them for courses that use blogs. This blog activity allows students to see their peers' study plans which can give them additional ideas on how to be prepared to be successful in school. Having students share their study plans with peers can allow for further community-building as students help each other and learn from each other, emphasizing a culture of care and openness to learning from and with peers.

Module 5: Technological Preparedness

In my conversations with stakeholders, another theme that arose was that students often were not prepared technologically for online learning. If students were new to online learning or to the Blackboard learning management system (or had not used it in a long time), they often had difficulty in their first course where the learning curve was steep, and students could become overwhelmed or frustrated with having to learn how to use the learning management system on top of learning the academic content. Stakeholders also voiced concerns that sometimes students did not have their own computers and would instead rely on their work computers for schoolwork. To address these needs, I designed Module 5 on the technological aspects of being an online learner. This includes both the technical requirements as well as the skills needed to effectively navigate and master online systems, tools, and technologies. Students begin this module with a self-assessment of their technological preparedness. Then students view an interactive e-learning Storyline presentation called Technological Preparedness that includes information on what technology students need for online learning such as their own computer (not a work computer), reliable high-speed internet (DSL or cable), a webcam, and a microphone. Technological preparedness also includes computer skills needed such as installing software, virus protection, managing files, searching the internet, bookmarking websites, and learning new technologies, programs, tools, and technical skills. This presentation provides an overview of the online systems and tools students need to know how to use in their program such as Google Suite, Microsoft 365, and Blackboard. This presentation also suggests websites for students to bookmark such as the University website, the Blackboard Help site, student email, Student Portal, and the Student Success Center website. This presentation also covers having a technology backup plan in case technology fails such as having a backup computer, having someone you can go to for computer help, saving the IT Helpdesk number on your phone, and saving coursework on the cloud. There is an open-ended question where students describe their technology backup plan. This presentation also includes a Self-Check with a few questions to test students' understanding of the material covered in the presentation. This module also includes links to video tutorials from the Blackboard Help website.

In this module, students contribute to an Online Learning Best Practices Guide Wiki where they give their tips, advice, or suggestions on how to be a successful online learner based on what they have learned so far or new information they find. See Figure 6. Students are encouraged to search the web for ideas and include links to articles, videos, or websites they find helpful in their wiki post. Included in

FIGURE 6. Screenshot of instructions for a wiki assignment where students provide tips, advice, or suggestions for how to be a successful online learner. Students are encouraged to search the web for ideas and post links to websites or articles they find helpful. Students can edit the wiki assignment together collaboratively to create an online learning best practices guide.

the wiki instructions is an attached job aid with written instructions and screenshots showing the steps of how to edit a wiki post including how to add links to their post. This peer learning activity allows students to collaborate on a shared post (wiki) and share best practices on being a successful online student to promote idea-sharing and collaborative learning. It also gives students practice using Blackboard wikis which will prepare them for courses that use wikis. Having students engage in a collaborative activity where each person contributes a piece to the larger whole promotes a cooperative teamwork-based approach to peer learning which can further the building blocks of creating a culture of care among students in the cohort as they work on a shared goal.

Module 6: Academic Preparedness

In my talks with the Academic Directors, they brought up issues of students sometimes not being prepared academically. This included students not understanding plagiarism, not knowing how to cite and format sources, not knowing how to use the library, and underperforming when writing research papers. To address these issues, I designed Module 6 on the topic of academic preparedness which would introduce students to the academic aspects of being a successful online learner such as using the library, conducting research, understanding academic integrity, and citing and formatting sources.

Students begin this module with a self-assessment of their academic preparedness. Then students view an interactive e-learning Storyline presentation called Academic Preparedness. This presentation covers some skills needed to be academically prepared for online learning such as being able to learn independently without needing a teacher to verbally explain everything (more onus on the learner to learn than rely on a teacher to teach you), digital communication skills, reading comprehension and writing skills, problem-solving and collaboration skills, and mental toughness for when things get difficult. This presentation also covers academic integrity, avoiding plagiarism, information literacy, peer review for quality research, and introduces students to the University Library website and APA style (as well as links to some APA tutorials). This presentation includes a learning activity where students go to the University Library website and locate a peer-reviewed article

from their discipline, industry, or profession. There is a text box in the presentation where students cite the peer-reviewed article they find in APA format. There is also a Self-Check where students answer a few questions to test their understanding of the material covered in the presentation. This module also includes tutorials and readings on how to use the University Library. There is an interactive Rise presentation on graduate-level writing expectations and APA Style and an accompanying quiz which students have unlimited attempts on (as a formative assessment for learning). There is information on using the University Writing Center to get writing assistance.

This module includes a library research assignment where students use the university library to research a topic of their choosing. Students write a brief paper on their topic and have to cite at least 2 peer-reviewed sources in APA format. This assignment also includes a simple rubric and introduces students to using a grading rubric, advising them to review the rubric before they submit any assignment to ensure they are meeting the assignment requirements. See Figure 7. The idea behind the library research assignment is it prepares students for assignments in their program as almost all summative assignments have rubrics. The purpose of the assignment is also to ease learners back into student-mode by having them complete an authentic activity and get some practice using the library and citing and formatting sources. This module also includes a journal activity where students post their library research paper as a journal entry (as an attachment) so they can see each other's research and get practice using the Blackboard journal tool. See Figure 8. Having students share their research via the journal tool promotes peer learning as they can get ideas and learn from each other to further build community and foster a culture of care and inquiry. This module contains the most content out of all the modules, but it is also the module students say is most helpful to prepare them for their graduate program as the answers students gave in the end-of-course survey.

Module 7: Online Learning Success Strategies

I added a final module about online learning success strategies to wrap up the course and leave students with a few final takeaways. These strategies are important to any learning environment, not just online, but I thought these strategies were worth making explicit, especially to students in online courses who could benefit by making clear how to be successful. I did some initial research to determine these strategies and added a few based on my knowledge. This module includes an interactive e-learning Storyline presentation called Online Learning Success Strategies. The goal
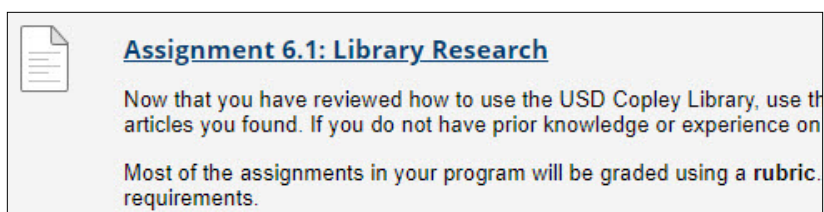
FIGURE 7. A screenshot of instructions for a library research assignment where students use the library to research a topic they are interested in. Students write a brief 300-word research paper describing how the topic relates to the articles or sources they found. There is a rubric attached to the assignments that students review which outlines the criteria for success.
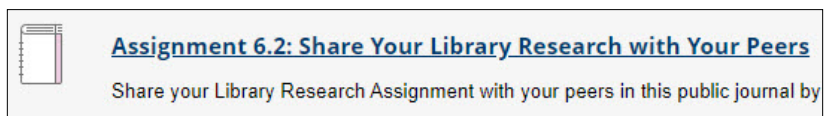
FIGURE 8. A screenshot of instructions for a journal assignment where students are instructed to attach their library research paper to a journal post so they can share their paper with their peers.

of the final module is to have students end the orientation feeling inspired and ready to begin their academic program by reminding students why they are here and to think about the big picture of what they will gain in terms of their professional and intellectual growth. The presentation encourages students to be curious about what they are learning, reflect on what they are learning, think critically, believe in themselves, ask for help when they need it, participate fully in classes, build a professional network, have a growth mindset, and make the most of their learning experience. This module includes an end-of-course survey for students to give feedback on the orientation course. This module does not have a peer learning activity and I think it would be a good idea to add a final discussion where students share at least 1 strategy they will use to support their success as a way for students to make meaning of the information presented and offer feedback, words of wisdom, or encouragement to their peers before they begin their program together. Adding this peer activity could improve the module by giving students a final opportunity to share and learn with and from peers to continue the momentum towards beginning their program together and furthering the learning community and culture of care.

PEDAGOGICAL/ANDRAGOGICAL APPROACH

The course was designed using an andragogical framework with opportunities for self-directed and reflective learning because the audience for the course is adult learners who typically work full-time, have caregiving responsibilities, and are over the age of twenty-five. The orientation is designed for students who will be starting online graduate programs. Therefore, the content of the orientation was tailored to meet the needs of students by introducing them to what it means to be a successful online student in terms of being

prepared academically, technologically, logistically, and psychologically. According to the stakeholders I spoke to, many students coming into the program have never taken an online course before and many have not been in an academic environment for some time, so this orientation was meant to ease these students into a course experience by having them complete authentic activities that mimic a real course. Modules 3-6 included a self-assessment where students assess where they are in terms of self-direction, time management skills, technological preparedness, and academic preparedness. This instructional strategy emphasizes autonomy, competence, and self-direction, which adult learners tend to desire. The activities in the modules also promoted this heutagogy where students engaged in self-directed learning. For example, in Module 2, students complete a scavenger hunt activity to locate important resources that they will need. Rather than just presenting students with the information, the activity put students in charge of finding this information (which was later reinforced in a presentation). Other active learning activities involved students doing Internet and library research so students could practice their skills and share their findings with peers. In Module 3, students create an Online Learning Best Practices Guide as a wiki with peers where they share their advice, tips, and suggestions for how to be a successful online learner. Again, rather than just giving students this information, students are empowered to develop their own best practices based on what they learned so far and on what they find after doing some Internet research. The library research assignment is an opportunity for students to dip their toes into doing graduate-level work which helps students develop their sense of self-efficacy.

Another instructional strategy that is incorporated into the orientation is reflection and planning. In addition to self-assessments, students are invited to reflect on several topics to help them clarify their motivation and plan for their future. Students are prompted to think about their support system, their schedule, their backup plan for technology mishaps, and their 'why' for being in school. This andragogical approach respects adult learners by inviting them to reflect, rather than just giving them information to passively absorb. In Module 4, students design a study plan for themselves where they are put in the driver's seat of their own success by making a plan that fits their life that they share with their peers in a blog.

Following principles of Universal Design, students are given "voice and choice" in how they consume the content as well as how they display their learning. The interactive e-learning Storyline presentations include an audio version and a transcript so students can choose what medium they want to learn from. Students also have the choice to post their discussions as video or written responses. All the modules (except Module 7) include a peer learning activity so that

students can share, collaborate, and build connections with each other in a social learning community. Having students connect and collaborate can create a sense of belonging for students which is fundamental to any learning environment (Peacock, et al., 2020).

Assessment Alignment

The orientation course mimics a real online course, providing students hands-on practice completing workflows and using course tools such as submitting assignments, posting on a discussion board, posting a blog, contributing to a wiki, and posting a journal entry. The assignments are also authentic in that they prepare students for their real online courses and give students an opportunity to think through how they plan to be a successful student. The library research assignment is very similar to a real assignment and even includes a rubric, so students are introduced to reviewing rubrics before submitting assignments. Multiple types of assessments are used, and they are designed to mimic the assessments in courses (surveys, quizzes, assignments, discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and journals). Self-assessments are used for students to critically reflect on their own learning progress. Self-assessment also encourages students to develop their judgment skills, be responsible for their own learning, and evaluate themselves. There is a strong alignment between learning outcomes and assessments students complete.

Module 1 learning outcome:

- Students should be able to introduce themselves to the community of learners in their program.

Module 1 assessment:

- Students should be able to introduce themselves in the Discussion Board where they post an introduction of themselves (in video or written response).

Module 2 learning outcomes:

- Students should be able to locate resources and services they need as a student.
- Students should be able to discuss their plans after they get their degree.

Module 2 assessments:

- Students should be able to locate resources and services they will need in a Scavenger Hunt activity that they submit as an assignment.
- Students should be able to discuss their plans in a discussion post where they share their personal and professional goals.

Module 3 learning outcome:

- Students should be able to define their motivations for doing their program.

Module 3 assessment:

- Students should be able to define their motivations for doing their program in a What is Your Why (Motivation Sharing Activity) where students post to a discussion board their 'why' for doing their program.

Module 4 learning outcome:

- Students should be able to establish a plan to support their success.

Module 4 assessment:

- Students should be able to design a study plan for themselves and post it to a blog.

Module 5 learning outcome:

- Students should be able to describe online learning best practices.

Module 5 assessment:

- Students should be able to describe online learning best practices by contributing to an Online Learning Best Practices Guide collaboratively with their peers using a wiki tool.

Module 6 learning outcomes:

- Students should be able to identify graduate-level writing expectations.
- Students should be able to conduct a basic search using the university library.
- Students should be able to write a brief academic paper based on their research.
- Students should be able to format their sources using APA Style guidelines.

Module 6 assessments:

- Students should be able to identify graduate-level writing expectations by taking a Quiz on graduate-level writing expectations and APA style.
- Students should be able to write a brief 300-word paper based on their research and cite at least 2 peer-reviewed articles.
- Students should be able to format their sources in their paper in APA style and submit their paper as an assignment and post it as a journal.

Learner Engagement

The approach I used to engage students was one where I sought to have them make empowered choices, reflect on their learning, and engage in meaningful interaction with peers. Students were empowered to create their own plans for their future success and share approaches they envisioned would get them there. Students were also empowered to explore their interests such as with the library research assignment and to make choices such as whether to submit a video or written discussion post. Students were invited to reflect not only on their goals but also on the motivations that drive their goals to facilitate students' intrinsic motivation. Asking students what lights a fire under them and makes them want to get out of bed in the morning as part of their 'What is Your Why' activity invites students to reflect deeply on what is driving them to pursue their goals. Being clear about why they are doing what they are doing will hopefully help students persevere when challenges arise. Helping students mentally prepare for beginning a graduate program was an important part of the course design. Students were also prompted to reflect on possible obstacles that can interfere with their goals and how they can potentially overcome those obstacles. Additionally, students were encouraged to think about how they will feel after they have achieved their goal and how they will celebrate their achievement. Students were encouraged to share their backgrounds, goals, plans, motivations, and interests with their peers not only to learn and find commonality but also so students could get to know each other better as the course progressed. That way, students will have already made meaningful connections with their peers before their online courses begin. Having students feel a sense of community with their peers helps with student retention, satisfaction, and success so the aim of this orientation was for students to feel a sense of belonging to the university, to their program, to their field, and with their peers and Academic Director.

Use of Tools

A variety of tools were used to engage students with their peers and to prepare students for the Blackboard tools used in their courses. The assignment tool, the discussion board, the blog tool, the wiki tool, and the journal tool were all used in the orientation course. To help students learn the tools, training aids were provided that included step-by-step instructions and screenshots. Module 5 (Technological Preparedness) included additional tutorial videos for using Blackboard tools. Having sufficient student support for using the tools was essential to the design since many students are new to online learning and the technology used in online courses. One student said in the survey, "For a student like myself, who is not technologically savvy, there were ample tutorials, videos, and transcripts to assist me."

Articulate Storyline e-authoring software was used to create interactive e-learning presentations to engage learners. These presentations included active learning activities such as Self Check questions and open-ended reflection prompts to engage students. One student commented in the survey, "The videos were helpful. It was a good example of how to accomplish the various tasks we may be asked to do during our coursework. I thought it was laid out in a very easy-to-follow manner." The orientation has evolved to meet the needs of the academic programs by adding custom elements to prepare students for specific technologies and skills they will need for their program. For example, students in the MS- Cybersecurity program learn about using Kali Linux and Python in Module 5 of the orientation. Students in the MS- Applied Data Science program are introduced to using GitHub and Slack in Module 5. Students in the MS- Learning Design and Technology begin setting up their design portfolio in the orientation and create a What is Your Why video using a video creation tool such as Panopto, Adobe Spark, Pow Toons, TikTok, or another tool they want to try out. Giving students exposure to and practice using tools will ideally free up their mental space for academic content when they begin their first course, as opposed to having to learn academic content plus technology tools which can be overwhelming.

IMPLEMENTATION

The new student orientation has been facilitated 94 times for each of the 9 online programs as of spring 2023. The Academic Directors for each degree program facilitate the new student orientations as the instructor to welcome and onboard new students into the program. Academic Directors can now determine if students are struggling before classes officially start as this orientation serves as a tool to determine risk for students in areas such as technological preparedness, time management, and academic preparedness so they can provide intervention and support. Academic Directors can provide feedback to students on assignments such as their study plan and the library research paper so that students receive guidance on expectations before they begin their program to help them get a stronger start. Academic Directors can also meet with students individually over Zoom during the orientation course to answer questions, or offer coaching. When a student completes this orientation, it is an indicator of the likelihood that they will be successful in their program.

Results from Student Evaluation Survey

Students were invited to take an end-of-course survey to give their feedback on the orientation as formative data collected for design evaluation. Surveys were gathered from Fall 2020 through Spring 2022 with 1,020 students completing the orientation out of 1,135 total which is about

a 90% completion rate. The question that helped me gauge the effectiveness of the orientation was Question #4 which asked students: Overall, how would you rate this orientation in preparing you to begin your classes? Extremely Effective, Moderately Effective, Effective, Somewhat Effective, or Not at all Effective. Results were gathered from 26 courses. On average, 59.01% found the orientation Extremely Effective, 23.04% found it Moderately Effective, 11.99% found it Effective, 3.58% found it Somewhat Effective, 0.12% found it Not at all Effective, and 2.23% did not answer the question. Most students found the orientation Extremely Effective. Students were invited to elaborate on their answers in a follow-up open-ended question. I got over 230 responses.

The students' responses to the open-ended question shared common themes. A couple of students critiqued the learning management system itself, saying it was not very intuitive and was challenging to use on an iPad. While I did provide robust support aids to help students navigate the Blackboard platform, I do not have control over the platform itself. The university is planning to migrate from Blackboard to Canvas so hopefully some of those issues such as a better user interface and mobile experience will be resolved. Some students mentioned that the amount of content was too much, unnecessary, or repetitive. Because students come into their programs with varying levels of preparedness, this kind of feedback is to be expected. One of the challenges of designing a course for learners of varying backgrounds is striking a balance with the right amount of information for less prepared students while keeping the course relevant for students coming in who are more prepared.

Some students suggested that they would like to hear from past students about what they did and how they were able to succeed or what they would do differently. Some students said it would be helpful to see student work as examples or even collaborate with past students. These are all excellent suggestions that should be considered for the revision of the course. These constructive comments are very helpful because they will shape the iteration of the course when it is revised.

Results from Academic Director Survey

Academic Directors who oversee the online degree programs were invited to take a survey on the New Student Orientation. Eight out of nine Academic Directors completed the survey. When asked the question: Overall, how would you rate this orientation in preparing students to succeed in their courses? Extremely Effective, Moderately Effective, Effective, Somewhat Effective, or Not at all Effective, 75% said the orientation was Extremely Effective and 25% said it was Effective in preparing students to succeed in their courses. See Figure 9 (next page) for the results of the survey.
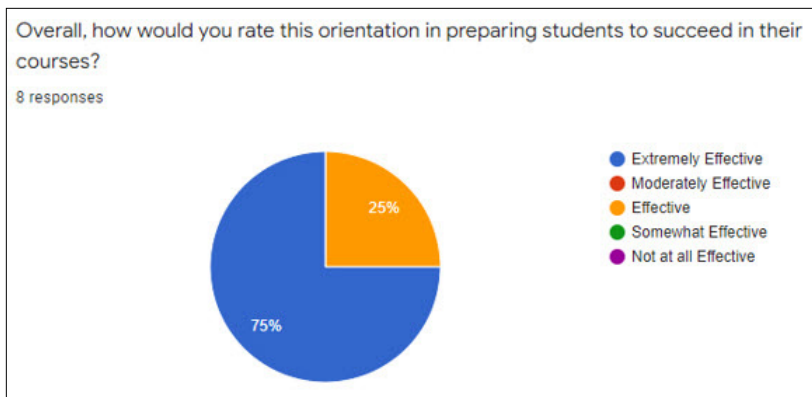
Overall, how would you rate this orientation in preparing students to succeed in their courses?

8 responses

- Extremely Effective
- Moderately Effective
- Effective
- Somewhat Effective
- Not at all Effective

25%
75%

FIGURE 9. A screenshot that shows the results from a survey of the Academic Directors. The majority of respondents found the orientation extremely effective (75%) and effective (25%).

USLDA Award

This new student orientation course received an Award for Excellence in Teaching and Learning from the United States Distance Learning Association in July 2022. This award is given to an outstanding individual or team of individuals whose teaching demonstrates effective learning facilitated through technology with measurable outcomes. I submitted the orientation course for the award by including screenshots of the course along with a description of each module and positive feedback students provided in the end-of-course evaluations.

Impact

Because this orientation seeks to help students prepare for their online academic programs, students should be more likely to have a smoother transition to life as a graduate student, be equipped to handle the requirements and expectations of their programs, have the tools and resources to navigate the various technologies and services available to them and be ready to deal with challenges or setbacks and overcome them. This sets students up for some of the realities they will face and gives them some tools and strategies to meet the expectations. One student said in the survey, "I feel very excited, motivated, and prepared to begin my courses!" When students are technologically, mentally, and academically prepared for their courses they have a greater chance of succeeding in their program. Completion of the orientation is now the top indicator of student retention and academic success. Academic Directors agree that the new student orientation prepares students to succeed in their courses which then translates to greater student retention, completion, and satisfaction. When students succeed, the university succeeds in fulfilling its mission.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The university is going to be switching from Blackboard to Canvas learning management system in 2023 so this orientation will need to be migrated and some of the elements will need to be redesigned. For example, Canvas does not have some of the tools that Blackboard has like wikis, journals, and blogs so these activities will need to be adapted using the tools available in Canvas like pages, discussions, and assignments. The module on technical preparedness that has tutorials on Blackboard tools will need to be redesigned for Canvas tools. Migrating the new student orientation to Canvas will also be an opportunity to have Academic Directors and other stakeholders review the course again to see what can be updated since it has been about three years since this course was revised.

CHALLENGES

Every design project comes with its own set of challenges. I was given a lot of autonomy in this project to make decisions about the design of the course, which in some ways made it easier to complete the project. The stakeholders trusted my expertise on design, while still providing feedback on ways they thought the course could be enhanced. While I appreciated the freedom to make important decisions in designing the course, looking back now there were areas that I overlooked that I attribute to inexperience. In hindsight, I think that I was operating off a set of assumptions about what students needed in this course rather than actual data about what students needed, especially for students who are considered high-risk. I did not seek any data about actual students or talk to any students to find out what their needs were. While I think the course met the objectives of the stakeholders I spoke with, a stakeholder group that did not weigh in was missing, students. The fact that the most important stakeholder group was not included in the design or assessment of the course makes it a challenge to determine if the course was ultimately effective. By some measures such as student surveys, academic director surveys, and the award given, it appears that the course was effective. However, the fact that there was no inclusion of students as a stakeholder group means that the full picture of effectiveness is not shown.

REFLECTIONS

It is important to reflect on the entire process to learn from this experience and make improvements to the design (Schön, 1983). In reflecting on the design of the new student orientation, I think one aspect that I would do differently next time is to seek out student voices *before* designing the orientation. Inviting students to give their feedback on the design as well as conduct some basic UX research could ensure that the design is aligned with what students need. Involving students in the initial needs assessment and draft

of the course was missing from the original design process. This would be a value-added element to include and a lesson I learned from this project. In the initial design, I spoke to some stakeholders, and they told me what they believed students needed in the orientation, but I did not talk to any students themselves. It would be especially helpful to talk to students who did not complete their first course (if that is even possible) to find out what happened and if anything could be done to help them persist. As I stated in my positionality statement, I have blind spots and gaps in understanding the student experience, particularly those who come from marginalized communities. It would be worthwhile to talk to students to get a better idea of what their needs are so I can design a learning experience for them and in partnership with them.

Along these same lines, it would be helpful to record some interviews with students who are done or almost done with their degree program and ask them to share some advice with those entering the program such as how they organized their time and planned their schedule, how they tackled difficult assignments, what they would do differently, etcetera. I interviewed students when I designed a student orientation at a previous institution I worked for, and the advice was so much more compelling and realistic coming from a fellow student than it is coming from someone else. This idea also aligns with the constructive feedback I received from students who wanted to hear advice and testimonials from previous students so they could learn from their experience.

As I stated in my positionality statement, I was just starting out as an instructional designer (ID) when I was assigned to this project. I have since accumulated more years working as an ID, so I have more working knowledge and experience to draw on. If I were assigned this project now, I would likely do things a little differently, beginning with the needs assessment. I would still meet with stakeholders, but I would clarify the goals for the new student orientation and ask more questions to gather information about who the students are and what their needs are. Sometimes the reasons for a student not persisting cannot be solved with training so it is important to uncover the real reasons students are not persisting and determine if creating a training is really going to solve that problem. At times, it felt like my objective was to try and please the stakeholders by giving them what they wanted in terms of information to include in the orientation without really analyzing the need for that information in collaboration with them. So, if I were doing this now, I would be sure that everything that goes into the orientation is aligned with the goals and ensure that I had all the relevant information before diving into the design.

One recurring challenge is time constraints. Once a decision is made by the leadership that training is needed, a timeline is put in place. But sometimes more discussion needs to occur before work can begin on the development of a training or course. The time needed to flesh out the needs assessment and analysis and uncover reasons for student attrition is what I would advocate for now. I would want to talk with students, particularly those who did not persist, to try and find the root of the problem rather than make assumptions. I would also advocate for more time during the development so that I could test the course with students and stakeholders and get their input during the design process, rather than just afterward.

I do think I got a lot of things right with this orientation course too. The feedback from the students who took the orientation was overwhelmingly positive and the negative feedback was mostly constructive and offered great ideas. The positive feedback from students is likely why I won the award because when I submitted the course for the award, I was supposed to also include data to show the course's effectiveness, so I included the data from the end-of-course evaluations and some positive student comments to support my case. Although I did not include the constructive comments from students in the award submission, I still think the overall evaluation of the course is largely successful even if it could use some fine-tuning and enhancements in future iterations, such as student video testimonials idea.

So far this orientation course has not been substantially revised based on student feedback. There have been minor revisions such as updating broken links here and there but no major revisions. The Academic Directors are responsible for initiating course revisions based on student feedback and other factors they consider. Soon the university will be migrating from Blackboard to Canvas, so this is a suitable time to review the course and make revisions. I have noted some minor revisions I think the course needs such as adding a discussion in Module 7. However, further review by the stakeholders is needed to make additional recommendations on how to improve the course based on student feedback and other factors they consider.

CONCLUSION

In my view, the New Student Orientation course has helped students begin their online graduate programs more technologically, academically, and mentally prepared by introducing them to the tools they will be using, the expectations they will need to meet as a graduate student, and the skills, strategies, and mindsets that will help them to be successful. Students and Academic Directors overwhelmingly agree that this orientation is effective in preparing students for their online academic programs. Completion of the orientation is a top predictor of student success. Although this course has been rated highly by students and Academic Directors, it can be improved further by including student input in the design to ensure that student needs are being more fully addressed and their voices are heard. It is also important to

consider whose voices are missing from the success ratings, namely the students who did not complete the orientation (and surveys). To address the needs of the students who did not persist, their voices need to be heard and outreach should occur to solicit their feedback.

Institutions that offer online programs can benefit from creating an online student orientation course to help students transition to being successful online learners by introducing them to online learning skills, strategies, tools, and mindsets that can set them up for success. That design process should also be inclusive of students themselves, both those who persist and those who do not persist, to ensure their needs are being effectively addressed.

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