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## ARTICLE

### Orientation From a Distance: Connecting New Students to Campus by Utilizing Video Conferencing

Therese Lask

*Video conferencing offers a new format for orienting out-of-state students and their family members. Institutions interested in utilizing video conferencing for orientation should consider several factors prior to implementation, including the demographics of the distance students, resources available at the distance site, level of inability for families to come to campus, and resources available for the program. The University of Northern Colorado has initiated such a program and offers a case example for usage of this creative, unique approach to connecting new students and their families to campus.*

The underlying purpose of university orientation programs is to "connect" students to the college experience in a way that will impact their future academic success (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989). Technology offers a new way to approach this goal by utilizing video conferencing for those students located long distances from campus.

Traditional orientation programs are implemented in a variety of formats. Many institutions offer one-day to three-day orientation programs during the summer, while other colleges schedule freshmen to attend orientation programs a week before the semester begins (Smith & Brackin, 1993). Orientation attendance is mandatory at some colleges and simply recommended at others (Strumpf & Sharer, 1993). While these traditional methods of orientation may be adequate for many students, they are not reasonable options for others. Particularly, students who live far away from campus may not be able to attend a summer orientation, and the distance makes it unlikely that parents will attend the program. While it is obviously more desirable to bring students and their parents to campus, video conferencing provides a creative, cost-effective way to initiate a positive campus experience with new students and their families. Of particular note is the addition of parents who might otherwise be excluded since "long before and after attachments are made to new classmates, friends, roommates, faculty, and staff, students rely on family/extended family members for feedback, reassurance, and guidance" (Austin, 1993, p. 97). Clearly, parents are important partners in retention of students during the first year experience.

#### A Case Example

The University of Northern Colorado (UNC) is predominately a regional college.

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Approximately 87% of the university's total enrollment of 10,393 is from Colorado. Enrollment of new freshmen for 1997 was 1,936, and the largest number of new, out-of-state freshmen, (117), was from Hawaii (Gavin, 1997). A concentrated recruiting effort by the admissions office, with assistance from a strong alumni support base in Hawaii, has produced a steady increase in enrollment.

In the past, the majority of these students were bypassed in the summer orientation process due to the distance they would have to travel to attend a two-day summer orientation program. In lieu of an orientation program, students generally participated in the mail-in registration process which consisted of a booklet of information, a college bulletin, and a schedule of classes for the upcoming semester. After reviewing the materials, the student selected approximately fifteen class preferences, and a peer advisor determined which classes were the most appropriate choices. Each student received a confirmed class schedule in the mail; yet, other components of a quality orientation program were obviously missing.

Since approximately 6% of UNC's new students are from Hawaii, there was an increasing need to design an orientation specifically for this population. The mail-in program was not providing a much-needed connection to a campus far from home. Proper orientation of these students is especially critical since the climate and culture of the two areas are vastly different. Collaborative efforts with the academic technology department make it possible for orientation to be offered via a long distance two-way interaction where speakers can hear, as well as see, their audience. The technology gives a more personal approach to students who have, in the past, had to resort to conducting college "business" over the telephone. Having produced the Hawaii Video Conference Orientation for the past two years, the University of Northern Colorado has established an improved connection with students and their family members.

The response the University of Northern Colorado has received from the video conference orientation has been positive. After the first year of implementing the program, the number of new students attending UNC from Hawaii increased from 80 to 117 students. Projections for 1998 estimate approximately 150 new students. Contact with students from Hawaii increased dramatically in the academic advising center (where the orientation program is located) and new students and their families have a better sense of who to call with questions or concerns about the university. Currently 40% of new students from Hawaii selected a learning community for their first semester at UNC—a substantial increase over previous years—which should improve retention of these students.

### Getting Started

A strong technical support coordinator is essential to implementing video conferencing. Planning for this type of program should begin at least nine months prior to the program date. The most complicated piece of the program is to identify a site that has the technology to handle a video conference. Other colleges often view this program as a competitive recruitment activity and will thus not be available; however, many hotels

and convention centers have video conferencing capabilities. To ensure the quality of the video portion of the conference, several equipment tests are necessary. The designated site must have the knowledge and experience in video conferencing necessary to produce the desired result.

The demographics of the distant population must be considered. Possible sites should be determined based upon where the majority of the students live and the ease of others nearby to travel to the location. Proximity to an airport, public transportation, and parking are important considerations.

The timing of the program is important for several reasons. It is generally preferable to initiate the on-campus orientation program prior to the distance orientation to allow glitches to be resolved before the implementation of the more complex distance program. Timing must be arranged to permit adequate advising staff to be available; in addition, it is important to give distance students equal access to programs such as learning communities, honors courses, and remedial courses.

### The Program

Developing the program for a video conference should be a relatively simple task for those who have strong on-campus programs. The orientation director often faces time limitations beyond those for the on-campus sessions, and topics will invariably need to be narrowed or shortened. It is an advantage for key personnel to have an opportunity to offer a personal welcome or to disseminate important information, being careful to avoid a lengthy series of lecture-format programs. Student panels are effective, especially in the areas of campus life, climate, clothing, academic life, dining halls, and time management. At UNC, for example, one member of a student panel brought his winter coat to show the audience appropriate clothing for the colder climate. A brief video tape tour of campus narrated by orientation leaders can provide useful visualizations of campus residence halls, dining facilities, academic classrooms, and recreation centers.

A challenging aspect of the program is how to develop an efficient method for advising and registering students for classes. Since the conference is a two-way, interactive video conference, only one person at a time can assist students with advising and registration questions. One option is to incorporate a traditional mail-in registration process prior to the video conference which includes information on graduation requirements, general education requirements, and basic course selection information. Students thus have copies of their fall semester schedules and can make changes during the video conference via a phone bank staffed by academic advisors or orientation leaders.

### Conclusion

Colleges and universities considering utilizing video conferencing should consider whether there are significant numbers of new students in one concentrated area to make the program worthwhile. It is important to know if it is a population which would benefit from distance orientation, since, in video conferencing, as in other orientation efforts,

"we must first understand the diverse populations on our campus [in order to] enable students to make an effective transition to our institutions" (Jacobs, 1993, p. 79).

Video conferencing offers a creative, unique way to connect new students and their families to institutions. While a collaborative effort from numerous campus offices is necessary, video conferencing provides a much-needed forum for important information concerning college life to be transmitted in a more personal, student-based format. It will be important for campuses to assess video conferencing to determine how much, if any, improvement is made in the matriculation, satisfaction, and retention of students oriented through video conferencing. However, the positive results experienced at UNC should be motivation to other campuses which enroll a significant number of students from a concentrated, distance location to explore the use of new technology in the orientation of out-of-state students.

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## ARTICLE

### First Year Orientation Programs at Four-Year Public Institutions: A Brief History

Michael J. Johnson

*Examining the history of orientation programs provides student affairs professionals an idea of past successes and failures and possible avenues to improve future programs. The more insight orientation professionals have, the more they may see the need to include aspects of college life that have been forgotten in the past.*

*The following article is a brief history of orientation programs since 1950 at four-year, publicly controlled institutions of higher education in the United States. An analysis of the early types of programs offered and the components of various orientation models throughout the history of American higher education will be highlighted. Historical trends will indicate that orientation programs in the future will move toward student retention and a deeper awareness for services that meet the needs of a diverse population of students.*

After a tentative beginning, first-year orientation programs during the 1980s, became a generally accepted forum for colleges and universities to communicate information about services they offer and to acquaint their new students with their surroundings. Such programs are now seen as an asset, if not a required part, of a college community. Orientation programs in their best form can directly support the academic mission of the institution. Often, an orientation program is the first major introduction a student has to the campus community, and because of this placement in the curriculum, it can greatly enhance the perception students have about their academic endeavors during their typical four or five year stay.

#### Definitions of Orientation

The American Council of Education in 1960 defined an orientation program as "the process of inducting students into the community of learning" (Brown, 1972). In 1986, the Council for the Advancement of Standards published *Guidelines for Student Services/Development Programs* which outlined that the goals of orientation are to "provide . . . services that will: aid new students in their transition to the institution, expose new students to the broad educational opportunities of the institution, and integrate new students into the life of the institution" (p. 97). Other definitions share common themes of developing the new student and acclimating him or her to the institution (Brackin & Smith, 1993), even though there have been differing opinions on the preferred length of

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