

Innovative Collaboration: Transforming a University's Orientation Program

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Designing an effective, practical, and efficient orientation for any college campus is a challenge. Add to that a population of students who are all commuters, mostly nontraditional students who attend an upper-division university, and this challenge becomes monumental.

These are inexpensive, collaborative processes between various departments that can work, as experienced at an upper-division university in the Midwest. The goal was to

redesign the on-site, voluntary, 3-hour orientation session to a mandatory, on-line, web-based interface orientation session averaging two hours in length.

In the past, undergraduate students admitted to the university received an information sheet in their admission packet describing the voluntary orientation sessions with a choice of four or five on-campus dates from which to select. The sheet explained that the required university proficiency examinations would be administered at the beginning of each session, with information and a tour of the university given after the exams.

Per university policy, all undergraduates were required to pass two proficiency exams in math and one in English. Since all the university's undergraduates transfer from other schools, these exams were not placement tools but were used to determine each student's proficiency in both subject areas. Many students balked at this testing for various reasons. For students who had not taken classes in some time, the proficiency exams generated anxiety while others were angry because they had successfully completed required math and English courses at their previous institution(s).

When traditional on-campus orientation was offered, approximately 30% of newly admitted students would attend one of the orientation sessions held each trimester. This meant that the majority of new students were unaware of even basic university services and policies. As the Student Affairs and Services Office delegated to administer orientation, Student Development staff members were aware that the orientation program for students needed to be revamped.

The idea of designing an on-line orientation program originated from a brainstorming session at a staff retreat. Options discussed included improving the current voluntary orientation, switching to a mandatory program, and attempting to reach distance learners. The staff also debated the effectiveness of the proficiency examination portion of orientation.

Approximately four months prior to this staff retreat, faculty members participated in a session on "Writing Across the Curriculum" and the concept of Directed Self-Placement (DSP). Directed Self-Placement is a process promoted by Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles of Grand Valley State University (Michigan) as a viable pedagogical, scholarly endeavor (1998); it is a simple yet complex assessment. Directed Self-Placement (DSP) asserts that when students are presented with the right kind and amount of information related to a required skill or competency (such as academic writing), they will be equipped to make a responsible decision about their need for supplemental coursework in that area. There is no "wrong" placement decision because the decision ultimately rests with the student. Thus, the process becomes empowering and holds students accountable for their own learning.

Further discussion explored the possibility of incorporating DSP into Orientation and eliminating proficiency examinations altogether. The Student Development staff knew that changing the exam policy would be the toughest hurdle, as approval would have to come from several levels: The Examination Committee, the Writing Across the Curriculum Committee, Student Senate, Faculty Senate, and the President's Office.

When the idea of combining DSP with a mandatory orientation was solidified, staff in the Division of Student Development contacted and partnered with the university's

Information Technology Services (ITS) department to begin the process of designing the actual on-line orientation program for student use. The team was able to recruit the university's web master (at no cost) to implement the work flow plan. A computer science graduate student was hired to do the necessary programming. The process of changing the university policy began with the efforts of the Assistant Provost, who was initially hired as the Director of the Writing Across the Curriculum; he, therefore, was fully supportive of the initiative.

The Student Development staff and the university's web master met twice weekly to discuss content, design, and potential problems. These weekly meetings kept staff motivated and maintained project momentum. At the point at which the on-line orientation was ready to go "live," the Board of Governors (BOG) degree program advisers were brought in to discuss how BOG students could help pilot the program. The first pilot ran with 63 BOG students in their first trimester of enrollment at the university. Instead of taking and passing the required proficiency examinations, the students were asked to complete the mandatory on-line orientation with the Directed Self-Placement math and writing components. The other critical piece was the student evaluation of the entire process. More than 60 students participated in the pilot, and 99% indicated that they enjoyed the process.

A second pilot with 107 students started in December 2002 and finished in January 2003. The Admissions Office was brought on board to discuss the details of informing students of a mandatory orientation and how to access the web site.

The final product of the university's on-line orientation program was divided into two parts: 1) Introduction to the university and 2) Directed Self-Placement in mathematics and writing. The innovative piece of this orientation program was devising a math portion for DSP, as well as creating an on-line version.

The success of this project was due to the collaboration and follow-through among several departments within the university: the Assistant Provost, Student Development, ITS, Admissions, and the Board of Governor's students for the first pilot run in October 2002. Because of this collaboration, the project was implemented relatively quickly. All departments supported the project because they believed it would benefit students. As of Spring/Summer 2003, the mandatory on-line orientation program with Directed Self-Placement has been policy, and all undergraduate students now participate. Assistance is available to students who still wish to tour and to complete the mandatory on-line orientation on campus.

The Student Development staff will continue to monitor the evaluation portion of the orientation, and will research the effectiveness of this type of application. In a time frame of approximately 18 months, staff from several university departments successfully changed the basic tenets of the institution's orientation program, a remarkable achievement.

Reference

Royer, D. J., & Gilles, R. (1998). Directed self-placement: An attitude of orientation. *College Composition and Communication*, 50(1), 54-70.