Orientation Issues for Distributed Learning Programs in Graduate Education

Poda Ibrahima, William Brescia, John Murry, and Michael Miller

Colleges and universities spend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and resources on student recruitment. Yet, once students are recruited to campus, fewer than 33%, nationally, actually graduate with a bachelor’s degree at their first institution. The result is a cadre of stop-gap measures designed to increase the likelihood that students will remain at the institution, including a number of orientation sessions and courses, advising, peer and faculty mentoring, and testing to ensure that the student and selected courses ‘fit’ well together (Scarlett, 2004). The challenges of retention are often greater than can be addressed through transitional programming, and can include the lack of maturity, focus, or motivation, lack of integration with the institution, and a poor fit between the culture of the institution and instruction and the student (Barefoot & Gardner, 2003).

The problems associated with drop-out and transfer can be varied for both undergraduate and graduate students (Choy, 2002). The challenges of retention are particularly acute, though, for graduate students and for students who participate in coursework through distributed education technologies. Indeed, the challenge of retaining students in certain types of distributed education technology enhanced courses, such as online courses, can result in high attrition rates (Kumar, Kumar, & Basu, 2002).

Graduate student attrition rates have often mirrored those of undergraduate student populations. Frequently, student attrition has been the highest in graduate education when students reach a dissertation writing stage, where the failure rate has been identified as high as 50%. Similarly, graduate students in the hard sciences and liberal arts have high attrition rates.

Low retention rates can be used as a demonstration for inefficiency and erode public confidence in higher education that may be linked to lower funding levels from public policy makers (Burd, 2003). The inability of higher education institutions to adequately control their retention rates has resulted in state-wide intervention and study, as illustrated, for example, by reports in Illinois, Alabama (Alabama Commission on Higher Education, 1997), and Arkansas (Arkansas Department of Higher Education, 2002).

The challenge for faculty and staff working with higher education curriculum, then, is to identify what specific problems students taking technologically enhanced courses
face and how institutions and instructors can address these problems before they occur. From this initial identification, future work by a combination of scholars and practitioners can weld together a program that effectively transitions graduate students into a variety of learning environments, particularly but not exclusively, online or blended learning courses (Bransford, 2004).

**Orientation as a Practical Problem**

New student orientation programs have been identified and developed to serve a variety of purposes. They are simultaneously expected to build community and educate students to the expectations of the new learning environment while at the same time providing the skills to succeed academically and improve retention (Twale, 1989; Mullendore, 1992; Haulmark & Williams, 2004). The disbursed nature of new student orientation programs has resulted in a fragmentation of efforts and lack of clarity about what new student orientation programs are supposed to accomplish (Nadler & Miller, 1999).

**Research Methods**

For the purpose of conducting the current study, a case study graduate preparation program was selected based on its willingness to participate. The professional preparation program dealt with student affairs in higher education, and one particular course that was being converted to a blended traditional meeting and online instruction was selected for further study. From this course roster, seven individual students volunteered to participate in the study. A battery of open-ended questions were identified based on the existing literature, and each of the seven volunteers was interviewed using a consistent interview protocol.

As a parenthetical note, the graduate level course identified for inclusion in the study dealt with legal issues in higher education, with a special focus on student affairs administration. The course, traditionally well received by students, is taken toward the end of their academic coursework and carries three semester hours of course credit.

Once the interviews were concluded, each audio tape from the interview was transcribed. When possible, the transcription was shared with the student who was interviewed to ascertain if the meaning and intent of comments were consistent with the transcription. No students requested that revisions to the transcription be made.

Each of the study authors were provided an opportunity to review each transcript and to attempt to identify themes or overriding ideas based on what the students had to say. The independent analysis provided a level of triangulation and validated the review of data.
Findings

Responding students expressed a variety of viewpoints about being enrolled in a course that was offered primarily in an online environment. Three emergent themes were identified: student experiences, challenges, and coping strategies.

As shown in Table 1, student experiences varied greatly, from one student who remarked "I was excited about the fact that I would be able to work at my convenience using the Internet," to others who indicated nervousness and "this was my first experience. I found the course extremely challenging and frustrating, to be honest."

These experiential based comments fell into five broad categories: exposure to the new technology, alternate readings, self-paced learning, increased responsibility, and anxiety. Every student interviewed expressed at least some form of anxiety, and yet each student also indicated that they were able to move beyond an awkward introductory feeling. A student commented "I was a little anxious at first about the whole online setting because I was afraid that I was going to miss something that was supposed to be done because I didn’t visit all of the necessary online places." Another commented "I was nervous at the beginning and after a while, I felt really comfortable with it, and honestly, this is one of the better courses I've taken."

Table 2 provides a stratification of the six challenges the interview participants identified, including accessibility issues, lack of navigation skills, resources on elearning, amount of work issues, need for documentation, and writing skills. Although students generally praised the accessibility of course materials, they also bemoaned the amount of work required for class. One student stated "there is something with this class...its like there is too much work..." and another specifically explained why she thought there the variance in the workload was problematic by saying "there would be no new info for weeks and then TONS at one time -- and it was frequently posted just days before it should have been covered." Another student remarked that the lack of in-class peer pressure alleviated her need to do the readings.

As shown in Table 3, students found strategies to respond to the challenges of the course. These comments were clustered into orientation, mentoring, reviewing material, availability, and enthusiasm. The orientation comments were largely focused directly at providing better learning on the Blackboard technology used for the course, as shown by one student who said "a little more talk at the beginning of class about how to do the online portion would probably be helpful..." and another said "just an orientation - it might seem obvious, but there were times where I was lost completely." In contrast, another student said "no problems and yes were totally oriented to the course." Frequent responses throughout the other categories highlighted the enthusiasm, accessibility, and helpful nature of the instructor. One student said "the professors were awesome, and they really did a great job of answering questions and creating a great website..." and other said "they were always there for us," and yet another commented "I think the professors did a perfect job mentoring and motivating the students." The feeling was not entirely consistent, however, as one student remarked "I did not feel a lot of support or interaction from the professors."
Discussion

New student orientation professionals are faced with an increasingly difficult challenge: how to provide an effective transition to a college campus that employs a wide variety of instructional strategies. As colleges and universities increasingly make use of distributed education, particularly blended and online courses, orientation professionals must position themselves to understand the challenges of these instructional settings and design experiences to better facilitate student success. Even traditional-aged students who enroll on a full-time basis and live in residential facilities on campus are enrolling in online courses, and the orientation professional must face the new realities of a technologically sophisticated campus. Specifically, orientation professionals must find some common element of clarity in their programming and must use that focus as a criterion for including activities. Technology has grown so substantially that an adequate orientation to a campus' technology expectation cannot be covered in a typical one-hour special interest session, and orientation staff must look for new and creative ways to help the institution convey its set of expectations to new students.

As for the respondents in this study, they clearly identified their biggest problem as the technical course navigation and a general unfamiliarity with reading expectations. The increased level of responsibility necessary for success was also highlighted, and it is certainly something that can be communicated and addressed in new student orientation programs.

New student orientation professionals might consider a number of different options to better help create a culture that appreciates online courses. These might be web based tutorials, modules of online orientation; large group presentations demonstrating how an online course works; and perhaps most importantly, new student orientation professionals should find out what academic departments and faculty are doing and planning to do with their online environments. In some instances, a great number of courses might be posted online or might have substantial online course support, while others might make use of email lists or listserves at a minimum. New student orientation is an excellent opportunity, for example, to communicate to these new students that checking email daily for faculty reactions or additional assignments or revisions to assignments is part of what the institution expects of students.

The data presented here provides a look inside how an online course is received by students, and offers some important suggestions for new student orientation professionals to think about and act upon. Further inquiry into the stages of intellectual and social development in online environments is strongly recommended, as is further follow up study with groups of new students encountering online learning environments.
References


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHALLENGES</th>
<th>STUDENT 1</th>
<th>STUDENT 2</th>
<th>STUDENT 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of preparation for online learning</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty accessing technology</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited access to resources</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical difficulties</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
<td>&amp; check</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2**

Interview Guide Matrix: Student Transition to Online/Hybrid Coursework

**PARTICIPANTS:** Accessibly Lowes, Lack of motivation, Transition to Online/Hybrid Coursework
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participating Students</th>
<th>Participating Students</th>
<th>Participating Students</th>
<th>Participating Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>Student 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Guide Matrix</td>
<td>Student Transition in Multilingual Context</td>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>