

## Orientation Issues for Distributed Learning Programs in Graduate Education

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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

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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 can not 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.

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TABLE 1

## Interview Guide Matrix: Student Transition in Online/Hybrid Coursework

## STUDENT EXPERIENCES

PARTICIPANTS	Exposure to new technology	Alternate readings	Self-paced learning	Increased responsibility	Anxiety
Student 1	More classes will be offered online, and I'm sure the more years go by, people will be comfortable with computers.		If I advocate hybrid, and one of the most valuable aspects of this program is that we have been able to come together to have in-class discussion with peers and professors.	There are so many things to do, and finally I don't really know how to prepare for this class.	This is my first experience. I found the course extremely challenging and frustrating to be honest.
Student 2	As a graduate student preparing for the professional field and dealing with these new modes, I think it's good to have exposure to something like this.	If I have a question or if I need to find something, I can get on the Internet and retrieve it at my convenience, and I don't have to worry about keeping up with hard copy documents when everything is at my fingertips.	If I have a question or if I need to find something, I can get on the Internet and retrieve it at my convenience. So I don't have to worry about keeping up with hard copy documents when everything is at my fingertips.	If teachers you responsibility to follow up with the instructor and course materials and how to communicate with classmates.	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.
Student 3	This new technology allows you can do the work on your own schedule.	There are a lot of readings that you can do on your own time and, I think this course is great for an online course because there are a lot of alternate readings and this course made it easy to click on a link and get to those.	I think that it allows students to pace themselves accordingly and work on their own time.	At the graduate level it is up to the student to learn - with these courses you can get out of them the effort you put in.	I had no idea what I was doing or how to work anything. It was all trial and error basis.
Student 4	I was excited about the fact that I would be able to work at my convenience using the Internet.		We didn't get super comprehensive with the material because we had already covered up to a certain point in some of our other in-class sessions.	I felt less pressured to read so I didn't do all of the required readings because I knew I wouldn't be sitting in front of a class being asked a question about the reading.	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 pieces.
Student 5	I think the hybrid format was great, but I would not have a problem with		I enjoyed being able to work at my own pace and not have to go to class, entirely online either.	Graduate students need to be responsible.	I was not very concerned with this format and I think this class was challenging than the Calculus class I previously took.

TABLE 2

## Interview Guide Matrix: Student Transition in Online/Hybrid Coursework

PARTICIPANTS	CHALLENGES					
	Accessibility issues	Lack of navigation skills	Resources on E-learning	Amount of work and time management issues	Need for	Writing skills documentation
Student 1	I don't have a computer at home and I have to make sure I do the work here at school and not at 10pm at other people at home.	The biggest thing in this class is to have computer and internet skills. It seemed like nobody knew where to go on the web page.	There are so many resources made available online and it's just difficult to know what to do.	There is something with this class... It's like there is too much work. To taking 9 hours this semester, and with this class, it feels like I'm taking 12. There are so many things to do.	At first, there was a lot of confusion. I do think about it as a student hearing something for the first time. But I think the introduction to the Blackboard needed to be more extensive.	Writing skills documentation
Student 2	I access the Internet at home and in my office.	There are some things on the computer that are difficult for me to understand. So in that regard, it made it somewhat difficult for me in that particular class.	My challenge in this class is that it is too difficult to keep up with all the materials.	I know that there is more responsibility on my part to keep up with the material. It's about being disciplined...	I have an eye to fall on but I, Yeah if I don't access the resources,	You have to quickly write your ideas and be able to communicate them.
Student 3		A technology savvy person also has a bit of an advantage, and this class seemed to take a lot of time trying to learn the concepts on our own.	The amount of information should be reasonable to cover in the allotted time period.	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 or before class.	Basic directions about Blackboard and tools available through the technology.	Writing skills are much more important in an online course.
Student 4	The Internet is available to me anywhere on campus.	I think that having strong computer skills and being proficient using the internet would help.	The resources on the Internet are tremendous and we have to select the best ones.	I feel that there was a little less reading than in an in-class setting, but perhaps because I felt less prepared to read so I didn't do all of the required readings because I knew I wouldn't be sitting in front of a class being asked a question about the reading.		
Student 5	Internet access is sometimes challenging, but it is so much better than it would be if we had to go to class every week.	I think for some people, more computer skills orientation might have been helpful.		It is extremely useful to have access to the professors but to be able to work on your own time frame.	A formal orientation to the technology and support materials are needed.	Students have to be driven, self-motivated and possess good writing skills.

TABLE 3

## Interview Guide Matrix: Student Transition in Online/Hybrid Coursework

PARTICIPANTS	STRATEGIES				
	Orienting students	Mentoring students	Reversing course content and material	Being available and accessible	Being energetic and enthusiastic
Student 1	The first time we had class, we were instructed how to use Blackboard.	I do think the professors have tried to point out along the way what is going to be used on the final but I don't have any idea about the structure of the final.	Yes, that'd be helpful. In this class, it's almost essential. You have to know what you know or know is right.	I had received a week before the class started. It was from one of our professors.	
Student 2	The first class was basically an overview of what we were going to be doing and it was also an introduction to the format that we were using. How to access our material on the Web.	They were willing to accommodate, and I really can't complain, and they tried to accommodate us everywhere around they could.	Instead of focusing on certain materials, a lot of students in the class including myself were not sure of some materials that were not required reading.	They were always there for us.	I think our professors have done a very good job with this course, and I hope they stay that motivated as long as they continue to deal with this course.
Student 3	Just an orientation - it might seem obvious, but there were times on Blackboard where I was lost completely.	I did not feel a lot of support or interjection from the professors. It was challenging but not really what I expected.	The professor should also know what they are doing in order to better help the students in using to learn this method.	This class seemed to take a lot of time trying to learn the concepts on our own, but the professors were available to us.	
Student 4	A little more talk at the beginning of class about how to do the online portion would probably be helpful, particularly if they used the computer on the projection screen to navigate through everything and involve everyone in the navigation process.	The professors were awesome, and they really did a great job of answering questions and creating a great website along with the website materials. They do us know that they were there to help us and that we could contact them at any time if we had any questions.	We got to choose which assignments we wanted to do for grades and that really made us feel more a part of the class process.	I think the professor was very good about helping us ease through the transition.	I think Dr. X did an excellent job with this. I particularly liked the way that he talked with the class and was enthusiastic about the course.
Student 5	No problems and yet we were totally oriented to the course.	I think the professors did a perfect job mentoring and motivating the students.		The profs have really been accessible to those who need help.	The professors were enthusiastic in their class and I think they did a great job.