

# Orientation Programs: Perspectives of an Online Format

Christopher Y. Futch and Kathy L. Guthrie

*Online orientation programs are a growing trend for delivery of information to new students within higher education. Considering the widespread use of Internet and technology and the increased personal and work demands on many students, higher education institutions need to investigate how orientation programs can potentially be delivered in an online format. A new framework should be explored to make this information more accessible to those students who are unable to attend the more traditional programs on campus, and to continue communicating with students throughout their transitional year. This article explores the concept of online orientation programs for students who physically attend at least one course on a postsecondary campus. The article also reviews some current programs and literature and provides recommendations for campuses looking to enhance this delivery option.*

Online orientation programs and first-year courses are a growing trend within higher education in recent decades. Jacobs asserted that it is becoming more common to find virtual orientation programs and courses, “particularly with the growth in adult, transfer, and distance education populations and with the increased need for campuses to categorize attendees in order to accommodate diverse traditional needs” (2003, p. 128). The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) stated that higher education institutions must come up with unique and creative orientation programs and methods if they are to meet the needs of both new and transfer students (2009).

Anderson (2003) identified three demographic changes taking place across higher education institutions: a surge in the traditional college-age population, increased racial diversity, and a growing adult population. Because more students are transitioning and adjusting to campuses differently, online orientation programs and courses have the potential to assist distinctive portions of the student population, particularly part-time, first-generation, adult and international students. Shaffer and Martinson (1966) encapsulated the philosophy that orientation is a process of communication. If administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals are to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, they must be ready and capable to effectively communicate the orientation process to students in a variety of intentional, yet practical, formats. This article reviews the trends in delivering online orientation programs and

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**Christopher Y. Futch** (cyf06@my.fsu.edu) is a Graduate Student in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Florida State University.

**Kathy L. Guthrie** (kguthrie@fsu.edu) is an Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Florida State University.

first-year courses for students who physically attend at least one course on a postsecondary campus, rather than focusing on online orientation specifically geared for distance learners.

The issues in the challenges of online orientation programs and courses are important for those working in student orientation and student affairs because of the large gap between research and practice of these online formats. Tighe (2006) exemplified this issue when, in 2004, she asked the National Orientation Directors Association's (NODA) databank editor about research specific to online orientation programs, but such research was not found. The problem is not that there are no online orientation programs and first-year courses for students physically attending community colleges and universities to conduct research on. In fact, a simple online search for "college online orientation" results in numerous orientation presentations and programs specifically designed for students who will be taking classes at a physical campus. However, if online orientation programs and first-year courses are to become a mainstay in the student orientation culture, more research must be conducted to understand the effectiveness of current online orientation programs and courses. Comparison of these online formats with physical orientation programs and first-year courses will serve to inform their efficiency, equity, and effectiveness for an increasingly diverse student population. Additionally, student affairs divisions and orientation departments across the United States should challenge themselves to consider how these online formats can both enhance and detract from their orientation programs.

## **Review Methodology**

The authors of this article searched for online orientation programs, online first-year courses, and related literature, looking for themes and innovative practices. This article addresses the styles, formats, benefits, and challenges of some of these online orientation programs, and it cites innovative practices for orientation programs. Finally, the authors make four recommendations for student affairs professionals, administrators, and policy-makers regarding the development and utilization of online orientation programs and courses.

### *Revisiting the Purpose of Orientation Programs*

The overall purpose of student orientation programs has varied over the years. Shaffer and Martinson (1966) argued that "the major purpose of orientation to higher education is to communicate to the new students that college is a self-directed, intellectually oriented experience" (p. 23). According to Jacobs (2003), a good orientation program includes "advising, registration, student assessments, physical orientation, campus services, financial aid and financial management, housing and commuter life, health and wellness issues, and campus pride" (2003, p. 130). Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfle referred to orientation programs "as a form of anticipatory socialization" (1986, p. 156).

More recent views on the purpose of orientation include developmental and socialization components, similar to that of Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfe. For example, Robinson, Burns, and Gaw (1996) stated that student learning is facilitated by orientation programs in a few general dimensions. These dimensions include integration in personal, social and academic areas, as well as the overall transition processes. Similarly, Shuh (2003) argued that orientation is another point of contact for students with the institution. This contact also begins the process of connecting to other students.

## **Benefits and Challenges of Online Orientation Formats**

Like many services and programs that have been transferred online, student orientation has begun to make its mark in the online realm. While many higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, have taken off with online orientation programs and courses, studies on their effectiveness are very limited. Still, some researchers have assessed and determined various benefits of these online orientation formats, as well as some growing problems and concerns.

**Content and structure.** Online orientation programs are usually designed as a supplement or complement to an on-campus visit. These programs usually give a virtual “tour” of the campus, noting important services and resources along the way. Online orientation courses, on the other hand, are normally a one-credit course that students take during their first semester. The course is usually structured in a way to facilitate peer interaction while learning about various services and resources through assignments and essays. For example, Cohen and Brawer (2008) applaud Mount San Antonio College as having an online orientation program in which students browse campus enrollment information and materials, and subsequently take a test on the material at the end of each module. This program serves as a way for students to understand and retain the information provided in the session while fulfilling the orientation requirement. Similarly, Tighe (2006) asserted that online quizzes reveal whether or not students have obtained and demonstrated competency of the presented information. Discussion boards for online orientation courses have proved useful as well in structuring content and interaction.

## **Benefits**

**Online orientation programs.** According to Jacobs (2003), technology allows for more individualized orientation programs. Institutions can place much of the information online, allowing for more dynamic orientation sessions rather than having to focus primarily on facts and details. Similarly, Johnstone and Shea (2003) argued that moving portions of orientation programs online will allow advisors more freedom and time to discuss future educational goals with students. Additionally, Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Bannan Haag (1995) stated that the increased integration of technological tools in educational

programming provides the means to implement instructional approaches that are current, relevant, and efficient.

**Online orientation courses.** First-year orientation courses usually serve as semester-long sessions to help students transition to the new academic environment. Many online courses focus on promoting communication among peers while utilizing assignments, discussion boards, and quizzes to help orient students to the various services that the institution has to offer. Tighe (2006) highlighted the Virginia Community College System (comprised of 23 community colleges throughout the state of Virginia) as an example of an institution that successfully implements online orientation courses. Tighe noted that all the instructors she surveyed who taught an online orientation course at that institution agreed that the online format accomplishes the aims and purposes of orientation. Thus, while the delivery method might be different from a student orientation class physically held on campus, online orientation courses can still achieve the same objectives and functions.

## Challenges

**Online orientation courses.** McVay (2000) discussed issues with online courses for both faculty and students. McVay noted that faculty members spend an extraordinary amount of time working with students on resolving technological problems, and that students often report feeling socially secluded. Bozarth, Chapman, and LaMonica (2004) surveyed students from North Carolina State University to determine the effectiveness of an online orientation course. They found that students did not see the need for an orientation program even though they admitted to needing more preparation. Furthermore, although Web-based instruction is becoming increasingly integrated in college curricula and programs, the use of technology can present a disorienting dilemma as students attempt to immediately develop skills to navigate the virtual learning environment, access required resources, and master the tools required to communicate and interact (Boyer, Maher, & Kirkman, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

**Community college population and online programs.** Hollins, Jr. (2009) suggested that community colleges are largely challenged in transitioning and retaining students because of the types of students they enroll, particularly part-time, first-generation, and students needing to improve remedial academic skills. With such a diverse group of students entering community colleges, the use of online orientation programs and courses can present special challenges. Miller and Pope argued that "many of the first generation and minority college students enrolling do not have the technology-based background for an easy adaptation to a high-tech community college education" (2003, p.18). Similarly, through a survey she administered, Tighe (2006) found that some community college professors do not recommend online orientation courses for targeted groups of students. Specifically, one instructor discouraged students in developmental classes from taking the online orientation course, noting that it was best suited for more self-driven and mature students who performed well in their previous studies.

***International students and online programs.*** Murphy, Hawkes, and Law (2002) noted that an online orientation program can highly benefit international students as many of the issues faced by college students during their transition pose as even greater challenges for international students. They argued that most colleges and universities do not take full advantage of the Web to assist different groups of students. Particularly, they posited that “one of the great benefits of the Web is its ability to overcome spatial boundaries and thus to free orientation programs from time and space constraints” (Murphy, Hawkes, & Law, 2002, p. 38). Because international students may have language barriers and difficulty acclimating to an unfamiliar environment, providing an online orientation choice allows for extra time and space to process their many transitions.

## **Recommendations**

Based on this review, the authors provide four recommendations for student affairs professionals, administrators, and policy makers regarding the development and effective use of online orientation programs and methods. As the need for online orientation programs continues to grow, higher education institutions need to take a proactive approach in meeting the growing diversity of student transitions.

### *Create and Sustain Necessary Services for Online Programs and Courses*

Technology tends to become outdated and evolve quickly; in order to best provide current information to students, online orientation programs and courses must be designed in a sustainable manner. Scagnoli recommended the presence of a “help desk” or “live help” in which advisors and staff members help answer questions that students are experiencing with technology (2001, p. 25). This type of help system can be especially important for students who struggle with technology or lack the necessary skills to succeed in an online program.

Additionally, online orientation programs must also equip students with the tools necessary to succeed in online academic courses as well as face-to-face courses. With the continual rise of students taking online academic courses to complement their face-to-face classes, online orientation courses can familiarize students with the challenges (e.g., navigating course website tools, utilizing communication methods with the professor and peers) associated with online academic formats.

### *Develop/Enhance Online Orientation Communities*

While online orientation courses thrive in breaking the spatial and time constraints of face-to-face orientation, creators of online orientation courses must strive to supplement the amount of social interaction that is often lacking. Iverson offered a variety of e-learning games that serve to foster and enhance social

interaction, such as an activity in which “learners create and distribute electronic business cards to introduce themselves and communicate their online identity” (2005, p. 39). Iverson also recommended problem-based e-learning activities like working together online to solve a current issue or institutional problem. E-learning activities, creative games, or utilizing discussion boards can serve to help students understand the academic and social challenges that they may face and overcome community and relational barriers often associated with online orientation courses.

### *Preparation for the Digital Age*

While students are sprinting to utilize the advantages of the digital age, student affairs professionals, professors, and administrators are often reacting to these technological innovations with trepidation. In order to combat this growing separation, higher education institutions must exhibit a more concerted effort to train their employees to meet the needs of students both in person and online. With proper training and continuing education, employees will be able to expand their services to reach a larger student audience.

Some student affairs professionals may express concern with job security, as services they provide in person are subsequently transferred online. However, Johnstone and Shea posited that “automating student services may not result in reduced staff or reduced workload” (2003, p. 366). In fact, placing services online can actually create a great need for student affairs professionals to meet the unreached student populations who spend limited time on campus, such as adult learners and students with dependents. Thus, student affairs professionals should focus on how they can provide services to students both in person and online.

### *Mobilize Institutional Resources*

Shaffer and Martinson argued that the content and activities of an orientation program are “not as important as the degree to which the resources of the total institution are mobilized to effectively communicate the essential nature and demands of the college” (1966, p. 26). In order for an online orientation program or course to be successful, all the resources available to students physically visiting the campus must also be available to students as online resources. This is not to say that they should be offered in the same format or style as services on campus. However, student affairs professionals will be able to reach a much wider segment of the student population by providing the many campus resources and services in an online format.

## **Conclusion**

As previously stated, research regarding online orientation programs and courses is very limited. In order to determine the effectiveness, efficiency,

and equity of online formats, more research must be conducted on the many institutions that already have these programs and courses. Specifically, research should be conducted to establish an understanding of which student populations best respond to online orientation formats. Analysis can include why certain targeted groups may struggle with online formats more than others. Additionally, these formats should be compared with face-to-face orientation formats to help determine the benefits and detriments of online methods in terms of increasing student retention.

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