

Leveraging Schlossberg's 4S Framework to Reconceptualize Online Orientation

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This article describes the process a regional teaching university took to reconceptualize its online orientation course during the course of COVID-19 pandemic through components such as the appointment of a faculty lead; extensive consultations with community partners; and bolstering the course foundation with Schlossberg's 4S framework of self, situation, support, and strategies. It offers an overall framework for an engaging program, including aspects such as integrating organic assessment and planning for ongoing course and program revisions as the COVID-19 pandemic influences a new normal.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted how higher education operates, including how new student orientation and first-year transition programs are facilitated. Much like most aspects of education that needed to shift dramatically during the pandemic, orientation programs also needed to get creative to ensure they were meeting their objectives, most notably to develop an engaging experience that would make new students feel welcome and supported.

This article describes the pivoting journey of a Canadian teaching-intensive university. Between the Spring and Summer of 2020, the university's small but mighty staff worked hard to record and assemble high-quality content to build an online course (non-credit) as part of an engaging new student learning experience in the new normal.

While the initial delivery exceeded the original objectives of creating and facilitating relevant online content within a short time, the team and its administrators felt there were opportunities to streamline content and enhance delivery. For instance, as part of their orientation, international students needed to complete two separate online orientation modules, one for all new students covering typical orientation content (i.e., how to navigate the institution) and one specifically for international students (i.e., introduction to Canadian culture). Additionally, it was evident that elements of the information being presented to students were not required to support their immediate transition into the institution; in other words, content could be better scaffolded in a 'just-in-time' format: What information do students need to know to succeed during their first week, as opposed to the end of their first term?

As such, the author of this article – a faculty member with previous student affairs and orientation programming expertise – was recruited in early 2022 to lend a faculty and teaching and learning lens to reconceptualize the online orientation course.

Use of Guiding Principles and Theoretical Framework

The author offered her lens as an educator-researcher by conducting initial consultations with team members responsible for online orientation. Team members were asked to identify the strengths and areas of improvement for each module and ideas they had to potentially merge the two. Simultaneously, past student evaluations were reviewed to assess what students found each module's most and least valuable aspects.

The combined feedback was then assessed and arranged into themes that formed the redesign project's guiding principles:

- Content and information are streamlined and based on necessity. What information must new students know to be successful before starting at the institution? Additionally, what should they know as they progress in their first semester?
- Content delivery must be experiential and interactive, wherever possible. It was acknowledged that the online orientation program was a student's first experience with the institution's online learning management system. Therefore, it would also be their introduction to the various features/tools used within the

system for their courses. Additionally, the team wanted to provide opportunities for students to engage with their peers through asynchronous activities so they could begin to build a peer network.

- The structure enables students to access ‘just-in-time’ information throughout their first term. The intention was that the orientation site would become the ‘go-to hub’ that connects students with the appropriate programs and services to meet their needs throughout their first term.

Finally, the author consulted student development literature in hopes of grounding theory with practice and ultimately selected Schlossberg’s (Patton et al., 2016; Schlossberg, 2011) 4S framework (self, situation, support, and strategies) to inform course design. Two key strengths were identified in using this framework. First, the theory moves participants from thinking about their unique circumstances (self and situation) into devising actions they must take toward their success (support and strategies). Doing so helps ground students where they are today and encourages them to imagine where they want to go and the steps they can take to reach their destination. Secondly, using a well-known theoretical framework promotes program credibility, given that the structure of the orientation program is based on proven transition theory, and made for a more impactful business case for senior administration to invest in the redesign of the program and added credibility when sharing the program’s design and development beyond the institution (e.g., conference presentations and academic publications).

From Theory to Practice

Based on the consultations, feedback, and overall planning, the following format was created for the revised online orientation course:

WELCOME TO OUR INSTITUTION AND ONLINE ORIENTATION

Students are welcomed with a general landing page featuring a welcome video and a video overview outlining how to navigate the course (an orientation on orientation).

TELL US ABOUT YOU

Aligning with Schlossberg’s “Self,” students have a chance to introduce themselves and to meet others in the cohort through the use of two Padlets (www.padlet.com): The first is a world map where people can ‘pin’ themselves and share their home country; and the second about their favorite song from any language which can become a playlist at campus events. A ‘get to know you’ survey is embedded for students to share their aspirations, their motivations for post-secondary education, and how they see this pursuit can fulfill their goals.

YOUR PREPARATION CHECKLIST

This section and the next were designed around Schlossberg's "Situation." A checklist is presented to students on items needed before starting school and during their semester. Three customized lists exist for all students, International students and Indigenous students.

LEARN ABOUT OUR COMMUNITY

Students learn about the educational environment they will be in, including factual institutional information complemented with perspectives from students and faculty who, via videos, impart advice and what they can anticipate in a typical classroom experience.

SUPPORTS FOR YOUR SUCCESS

The fifth section is built with Schlossberg's "Support" in mind, highlighting the supports and services that enhance students' academic success. This section briefly overviews academic advising, learning support, financial aid and assistance, counseling, Indigenous student services, recreation, career development, and more. A quiz assesses student learning with factual and scenario-based questions to enhance learning.

YOUR NEXT STEPS

The final content-based section of the orientation module addresses Schlossberg's "Strategies." Completing online orientation is the first step in students' transition experience. Additional opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the campus experience are presented, such as in-person orientation programs where students have the opportunity for campus tours and to meet members from student and academic affairs. Mentorship programs, academic skills-based workshops, and student clubs are also highlighted.

YOU DID IT!

This section celebrates the completion of the online course with an inspirational video and congratulatory words from recent graduates.

ASK US

An open discussion forum is hosted on this page throughout the semester, where students can ask any question and receive a response within a maximum of two days. Links to the orientation team's social media accounts and the team's phone number and email address are also posted.

The project's core objective was to ensure it was as engaging and accessible as possible for all students. Consequently, aspects of the design included:

- Transcripts and captions for all video-based content
- Interactive components created using H5P, an HTML5 tool embedded within the learning management system that creates interactive online experiences for students.
- Gamification allowing students to earn points as they interact with the content and can track their progress.

Implications and Future Directions

Fall 2022 was the first semester this newly reconceptualized course was implemented, and by the time of publication, official feedback had yet to be analyzed. Regardless, anecdotal feedback obtained through the online discussion forum, assessments of general student engagement trends via the learning management system's analytics, and general conversations with some student participants has yielded several implications for orientation professionals to consider.

First, orientation is one of the few programs and events that involve the entire institutional community. As such, its success is enhanced through partnerships. Further collaboration with faculty, especially those teaching first-year courses, would be valuable to add more significant insights into the challenges first-year students experience in their courses to identify interventions within the orientation programming that can mitigate issues from occurring later in the term. Another fruitful collaboration for this institution was with its Teaching and Learning Centre, which continually introduces new tools and features that can be embedded throughout the course to make students more comfortable with their initial exposure to these features.

Secondly, there needs to be an emphasis on continual program assessment and evidence-based practices. Currently, the course includes an end-of-course survey. To properly assess outcomes, it would be ideal to have students complete both a pre and post-course survey to measure their growth through the 4S's. The surveys would also allow them to reflect on themselves and their situation as they transition to university, generate awareness of the support they need and develop tangible strategies for their academic, professional, and personal success during their first semester and beyond.

While the first cohort is just completing their experience, initial results are positive, and they have already lent themselves to exploring additional enhancements to

make the experience even more meaningful. This orientation team appears to have thoughtfully designed a program – based in part on Schlossberg’s 4S framework – that is both providing students with necessary and just-in-time information while also enabling them to connect online and begin to form a sense of identity for themselves and their community.

References

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