

Q&A Session for Creating Successful Online Student Service Programs Part III

Date: November 17, 2005

Q: Do any of the data sites have retention or attrition statistics for online programs (most interested in undergraduate).

A: The sites I listed in my responses after session two include retention data for undergraduate and graduate institutions. This information is typically derived from reports each institution provides to the federal government (i.e. IPEDs). However, this information is national or perhaps regional data. To get more information about other institutions close to you, I would suggest contacting them directly.

Q: Can you point to any "best practice" examples of online orientation programs that involve a significant amount of interaction between student and the college/university - or between students?

A: Yes, they are TYPE IV orientations. I covered these in the presentation, so hopefully this discussion provided you with some valuable information and ideas you can use at your own institution.

Q: How would an online orientation differ for non-traditional students?

A: We do not make the distinction between traditional and non-traditional students for our online orientation. We have large populations of both, but we feel that the orientation is generic enough for both groups. If your non-traditional population differs significantly from your traditional then you may consider offering a different mode.

Q: Do you have any websites or statistics for 2 year community colleges

A: Please see the websites listed in my responses to the second presentation. These sites allow you to obtain data for 2-year, 4-year, and graduate institutions.

Q: Are there any sites that deal with graduate students?

A: Please see the websites listed in my responses to the second presentation. These sites allow you to obtain data for 2-year, 4-year, and graduate institutions.

Q: I am curious. I note that you take the position that students are in a sense consumers. How do you deal with the rudeness associated with this?

A: I have to interpret your question, so forgive me if I misinterpret it. I assume you are talking about rudeness from faculty or administrators since these are the only groups that are typically

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closed to this idea at institutions where I have worked. I handle the rudeness by clearly explaining why students are consumers. First of all, students are paying for a service (an education). They are buying our product. While it can certainly be debated that an education is not a product, the basic premise is that a student hands us money and we then grant access to education. Remember, students are consumers of knowledge. If our product is knowledge, then our students are purchasing our product.

Second, our society is a market economy and our students have certain expectations about how they should be treated. In that sense, they are looking for the best option for them (they are shopping around). If a student does not like the service they receive from us, they may decide to go elsewhere.

Finally, students can be treated differently within an organization. When dealing with the student service functions, they can be treated as customers or consumers because they are accessing a service. When the student interacts with faculty in the classroom, they can be treated as learners. This option typically quells faculty rudeness because they want the student to receive good service from the administrative arm of the institution, but they want the student to be a learner when in the classroom.

One last thought. Students with whom I have interacted have never complained about the service we provide (unless it was bad service). Students really appreciate being treated as paying customers when they interact with the administrative arm of the institution. Therefore, from a student perspective, they are consumers.

Q: Sorry, we missed the beginning of the presentation (before question break 1); could you include the websites you mentioned in the info you send out later?

A: You should receive this information from Academic Impressions directly. If you have further questions, let me know.

Q: Can you direct us to a resource on how to build a wiki site?

A: Here is some information about a free wiki. Institutions can utilize this software to build their own wiki. <http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki>. As I mentioned in my session, my graduate program produced its own wiki. Here is the link to that wiki:

http://www.globaledfutures.com/Main_Page

Q: Landon, off topic but how have people implemented online faculty academic advising without software like degreeworks?

A: Online faculty advising can be designed in conjunction with DegreeWorks (or equivalent

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software from PeopleSoft, Datatel, DARS, etc). I would definitely recommend developing a more robust faculty advising site because tools included in the DegreeWorks package lack significant interaction with other entities. Therefore, I would suggest building discussion boards, blogs, and virtual chat rooms for students to not only interact with faculty, but also to interact with one another. The virtual chat rooms can be locked down to insure confidentiality.

Q: Is there an inexpensive plug in that would track the advisement conversation for the record?

A: Most chat tools will allow the user to print or save the content of the conversation. This is certainly so for text-based chat. I am not sure if audio chat tools allow the user to save the chat to disk. I believe the technology is available, but I am not sure if the technology is used for virtual audio chats.

Q: Who is developing your virtual orientation? What resources are required?

A: Our current online orientation was developed by our academic counselors and our IT staff. We are in the process of completely revamping our online orientation to include a lot more interaction. This will be done cooperatively between our academic counselors and our IT staff.

As I mentioned in the session, we are also on the verge of starting development on a game-based orientation. This is in response to Mark Prensky's book, *Digital Game-Based Learning*. We really feel that we have a significant number of students who are accustomed to learning in a more digital, yet interactive way. Therefore, we will likely work with a local college that has a game design program. We will hopefully be able to partner with this program to provide some of their students with internships while paying for some or all of their tuition.

The game-based orientation will not be required; rather it would be another option for students to orient themselves to the college. We would maintain our on-campus and online orientations.

Q: Are you aware of schools that use iPods to deliver lectures to students - maybe as part of orientation, too?

A: I am not aware of any specific schools off-hand, but I am aware that it is happening. Often times this is happening whether faculty members approve of it or not. For those faculty who approve of this practice, they will record their lectures and make the lecture available to students with iPods (or an equivalent) or just a connection to the internet. For those faculty who do not approve of this practice, it still happens. The difference is that a student will record the lecture and make it available on the web for other students to access. One set-up I heard of was a group of students who took turns attending the lecture. The student who attends the lecture would record the lecture and make it available to the other students in the group.

My suggestion would be to encourage taping lectures and perhaps putting them online behind a login (especially if your faculty members are concerned about intellectual property). By placing

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the lectures online, you allow students who are studying remotely to access the lecture. It also would allow the institution to perform performance reviews of their faculty.

Q: Why are Student Affairs services not mentioned in the WCET definition of orientation?

A: Student Affairs is built into the definition when it talks about financial aid and cost/payment policies. These two categories do fall under student affairs for some institutions. That said, the rest of student affairs is not referenced in this definition, but is mentioned throughout their best practices guidelines. You can find these guidelines online at:

<http://www.wcet.info/resources/accreditation/Accrediting%20-%20Best%20Practices.pdf>

Q: Can an institution make an online orientation mandatory?

A: We make orientation mandatory, but allow students to choose what mode is more appropriate for them. I think that if your institution is an online institution, then there is a stronger argument for making online orientations mandatory. However, if your institution is land-based, then it is difficult to force students into an online orientation.

Similarly, it is difficult to force all students into an on-campus orientation. If a student will never set foot on your campus and does not live within driving distance of your campus, it is not justified to require this student to attend the on-campus orientation. Therefore, the best alternative is to provide options.

Q: Can you give us sample sites where students can be directed to specific topics related to their needs within the generic orientation i.e. athletics, disabled students, etc?

A: I might be misunderstanding this question. The sites I provided throughout the session provide examples of how institutions are handling their online orientation. Through the various orientations that I showed to you, I discussed specific topics where students can be directed. If the orientation includes a discussion of the academic calendar, then the institution should include a link to the academic calendar. If the orientation includes information about interacting on discussion boards and in virtual chats, then the institution should include information and links out to discussion boards and virtual chats.

Q: Can you give a list of campus offices you would recommend be involved in creating the online components of orientation

A: I would recommend that most offices be involved in developing components of an orientation. The key is not to overload the student. The reason why Type IV orientations are so appealing is because they are essentially courses. Since courses can be accessed throughout the semester, the student is really orienting themselves to the institution over a span of semester as opposed to a span of just a few hours or days. When institutions commit to a Type IV

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orientation, more offices and faculty can take a part in orienting students because content can be spread out and targeted during relevant points in the semester.

Q: Can you talk about baseline reading literacy?

A: I assume you are referring to assessing a student's reading level prior to allowing them to partake in an online orientation (text-based) or online classes. Some of the institutions for which I have worked developed self-assessment tools to help students self-select out of online courses if their reading skills are not up to par. However, I have not seen an institution that uses assessments/reading placement exams to exclude students from the online orientation or online courses.

Q: Are colleges offering online orientations in languages other than English?

A: I would suspect that there are institutions that offer orientations in languages other than English (such as Spanish) if they have a significant number of non-native English speakers.

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Q: Can you give specific examples of how you've created learning communities with students at risk.

A: We first identified some (not all) factors that might put a student at risk. The factors we chose to focus on were first-generation college student, ethnicity, gender, and placement exam scores. Based on these factors, we identified students and have discussions with them at orientation. If after the discussion, we felt the student would benefit from our learning community, we would encourage them to register for the three course learning community. The students within these communities will take classes together for either one or two semesters.

Q: Do many schools use web forms to allow students to schedule in-person orientations?

A: I have seen some schools that allow students to schedule their in-person orientation, but not very many. We decided to create an online reservation form for our students as part of our effort to place all forms online in a web-submittable format. The technology behind web-based forms is not incredibly complex. I would guess that your institution has at least one web-based form and that your IT department could help you build web-based forms.

Q: Is there a way to keep track of which students have completed the online orientation?

A: Yes. As long as students are required to login, they can be tracked. Once logged in, the orientation can require students to simply click through the pages or it can require the students to demonstrate their knowledge. Either way, all student actions (once logged on) can be tracked.

Q: Type 2 seems very text heavy. We're wondering about the likelihood of students actually reading all that text...

A: Type 2 orientations are all text and as a result, it is very unlikely that students will actually read it all. This is similar to an on-campus, lecture-based orientation. There is a lot of information provided and it is very unlikely that students will listen and absorb all the information provided. Institutions can help insure that students will read the text by testing them for understanding.

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Q: Can you share your experiences with on line orientations for distance students?

A: When I worked at Walden University, students were orientated over a span of a quarter. The orientation began with a conference call between an academic counselor and 8-10 new students. This gave the student the opportunity to connect with someone at the institution and with other students. They did not receive a lot of content, but they did get enough to get started (email, BlackBoard, basic policies and procedures).

Following the conference call, the students were assigned to a course environment orientation. This course was taught by an experienced faculty member who was able to encourage interaction and participation. Each week, the course would cover topics that were relevant to the student at that time. These topics would include library research, registration, writing a professional development plan, and writing a program of study. Again, these topics were covered at times during the quarter when a student would likely need to know about them.

The key to the conference call and the orientation course is relevance. It was important for us to understand that we needed to provide students with information as they requested it and when we knew they would need the information.

Q: Do you know of any data that compares the success and retention of students who complete an online orientation vs. a traditional, on-campus orientation?

A: I have not seen any data comparing success/retention rates between online and on-campus orientations. I would suggest that the individual institution conduct its own research between these two types of orientations.

Q: What is your opinion of some of the "canned" online orientation services/companies that are currently providing contract services to colleges?

A: I am leery of "canned" online orientations. I am then willing to outsource the technical aspects of building an online orientation, but would never contract out for content. If these third-party companies simply provide the technical framework for an online orientation, then I would be comfortable with their services. However, if they try to sell you content, I would shy away from contracting with them.

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Q: Is there data on satisfaction levels with online vs F2F orientations?

A: The only data I have is from my own institution. Our students have indicated that they are unsatisfied with neither the online nor the F2F orientation. That indicates to us that we are losing a lot of people before they even start their courses. As I may have indicated during the session, our on-campus orientation is largely lecture based with some small group interactions, while our online orientation is largely text-based (Type II). Clearly, these two formats are not working for our students, so we are in the planning stage of overhauling all of our orientations. This includes incorporating a model like Walden's orientation (see above) for our online orientation, a game-based orientation, and a much more interactive and engaging on-campus orientation. As mentioned above, all three modes will rely heavily on relevance. We want to make sure that our orientation material is relevant for our students at times when they need to access that information.

Q: Of the schools having type III and IV how many have separate orientations for transfer and freshmen students?

A: I think many schools have separate orientations for transfer and new-entering students, however, I do not necessarily recommend this approach. Many schools (ours included) set an arbitrary number of credits as the sole criteria for entering the other orientation. Previous credits from another institution are not necessarily the best indicator of a student's competence. Therefore, I would recommend coming up with multiple orientations and a set of criteria for each one. You could either let the student self-select their orientation or you could assign them to the appropriate orientation based on the criteria established ahead of time.

Q: What do you suggest online services do to address issues faced by individuals with certain disabilities face with synchronous/chat room participation? e.g., manual dexterity, learning disability, etc.

A: My only advice here is to work closely with your ADA expert and your IT staff to make sure people with disabilities can participate. The point of ADA is to insure that students with disabilities have access to services other students have access to (though it may not be in an identical form). Those institutions that make access a priority on their campus will certainly find creative ways to work around technology limitations.

Q: What resources might be available to ensure websites are in compliance with mandated ADA regulations that go into effect in July 2006?

A: I am not able to answer this question intelligently because I have not seen the ADA regulations that go into effect in July 2006. I spoke with our system's ADA expert and he was not aware of new website regulations. That said, anytime new regulations are set, I recommend that the institution's ADA official work with the IT staff and webmaster to make sure the website is compliant. Once someone is made aware of the new regulations, they are typically more than willing to make adjustments. If you have the regulations already, I would share them with your IT staff sooner rather than later. In my opinion, it is always better to act proactively rather than reactively.

BTW, if you can direct me and the other participants on the web conference to the new regulations, I would greatly appreciate it.

Q: Landon, may I share these slides with my colleagues on the student services working group?

A: Yes, you can share the slides as long as you give credit to me. I am about sharing information and the more people who are aware of some of these issues, the more likely good change can occur.

Q: How would you make an online game orientation accessible to everyone?

A: Our intent with our online gaming orientation is to set criteria (initially) and allow those students who meet the criteria to go through the gaming option. If after a few semesters, we find that we can expand the gaming orientation option, then we will open it up to any student who feels they would benefit from the gaming option. I wouldn't recommend opening a gaming orientation to everyone at the beginning until you know who will be successful and how useful the orientation is for the students.

Q: Why do you think Everquest is so addictive? What is the draw?

A: I believe the Everquest is so addictive for two primary reasons. First, the player is able to escape from real life and act out their fantasies. They are able to interact with real people (allow they are virtual representations of real people) and are able to experiment.

Second, I believe players reach a state of "flow." Again, flow theory states that a person reaches a high level of satisfaction, contentment, and joy by participating in tasks that meet the players level of skill (not too easy and not too hard). When this happens, time becomes less noticeable and a flies by without notice. As a result, players miss work and school and often times neglect their families.

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Q: How do you assess your online orientations?

A: We will assess our online orientations the same way we assess our on-campus orientations. We are in the process of developing survey tools that will be sent to students as they complete their orientation. We will ask for their opinions about the orientation, test their knowledge, and ask for input about making the orientation better. We will also conduct some follow-up interviews and start focus groups. The qualitative and quantitative data we receive will then be used to improve our orientations.

Q: Do you have any examples of orientations online for NON online schools? All of your type IV examples seemed to be for online colleges.

A: Actually, all of the Type IV orientations I showed you were for non-online schools. While the online schools certainly are using Type IV orientations, many on-campus schools that offer online courses have Type IV as well.

Q: Do you know of any grants that would allow us to develop Virtual World/Role Play Orientations?

A: I do not know of any specific grants, but as I indicated in the session, I believe that video game companies may be interested in helping develop virtual worlds for learning and training. Because most video game companies focus heavily on entertainment and because education is a large market, these companies would probably be interested in breaking into it somehow.

Q: Wanted to follow up, can we share these slides internally?

A: Yes, you can share the slides as long as you give credit to me. I am about sharing information and the more people who are aware of some of these issues, the more likely good change can occur.

Q: Are there website that can help with graduate orientation and will we get the information for all of the questions asked during this session?

A: While the type of student differs between undergraduate and graduate level, the basic format for orientations may not change. The best models for graduate level orientations are from the online institutions (Capella University, Walden University, University of Phoenix, etc). I would refer to their orientations when developing yours.