
Occasional Paper: Creating an Interactive Online Orientation for Alliance Students

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Need

Student demand for online education continues to grow as a leading format for learning in higher education (Allen et al., 2016; Jones, 2013; Cho, 2012), and post-pandemic this is only expected to increase (Garrett et al., 2022). However, the national retention rate for online students is lower than rates in traditional face-to-face courses (Ali & Leeds, 2009; Allen & Seaman, 2013; Bawa, 2016; Beckford, 2015; Cho, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011). According to a study by Brown, Kush, and Volk (2022), this continues to be the case post-pandemic. Several factors may contribute to lower retention rates (Jones, 2013) including feelings of social isolation (McInerney & Roberts, 2004), stress and uncertainty about online learning, and technical difficulties, specifically with learning management systems (Anderton, 2006; Cho, 2012; Robinson et al., 1996). Retention and completion are key metrics at both the graduate and undergraduate levels by which universities, systems, and institutional rating organizations evaluate institutions and student success. Additionally, students who take some college courses but do not complete a degree are burdened with debt without a credential and potential advancement. Consequently, creating a supportive online environment is essential for the student and institution.

Many of the factors contributing to lower retention rates identified in research also emerge in data collected by Great Plains IDEA. Two surveys are regularly administered to new students in both human sciences and agricultural programs during their first semester of coursework through Great Plains IDEA. The New Student Survey is sent within two weeks of the start of classes, and the New Student Check-In survey is sent at the midpoint of the student's first semester. These surveys gather data regarding student's knowledge of the alliance, ease of accessing and using resources, and overall experience in their courses. The Great Plains IDEA management team regularly reviews survey data to determine the need for resources or areas of improvement for the alliance.

Methods

Analysis of survey data collected between 2017 and 2019 included responses 454 responses to the New Student Survey and 305 responses to the New Student Check-In Survey. Participants included degree and non-degree-seeking students from human sciences and agriculture programs. Respondents from the New Student Survey identified as females (74.35%), males (25.18%), and other (0.47%). Nearly half of respondents were between the ages of 22 and 29 years (47.98%) and were employed either full-time (65.97%) or part-time (25.41%). Respondents from the New Student Check-In Survey identified as female (79.78%), male (19.12%), and other (1.10%). Almost half of respondents were also between the ages of 22 and 29 years (48.88%).

Responses revealed five key themes including the following: understanding the Great Plains IDEA model; navigating multiple learning management systems; engaging strategies to be successful in online learning; advising issues with faculty; and engaging in group projects. Reflecting on these results, coupled with empirical research on online retention, the management team identified the need for an online orientation for student success when enrolled in a Great Plains IDEA-supported program.

The Solution

The management team identified key elements for six orientation modules such as the nuances of the alliance and addressing anxieties about success in an online learning environment. The Great Plains IDEA team determined it was imperative for the orientation to be accessible to students across all nineteen alliance universities and eighteen human sciences and agriculture programs. Through adapting educational technology, the alliance team created an interactive, accessible orientation using Qualtrics, a web-based survey software.

Logistics

The team sorted the content into six modules, each addressing an aspect or challenge of taking online courses. During program meetings, the team informally sought faculty feedback regarding areas where further resources may be helpful. Specifically, the modules informed students about how Great Plains IDEA functions, who to contact with questions, what the expectations are in an online learning course, how to navigate multiple learning management systems (LMS), and what tools and resources would support student's success. The six modules include:

1. Welcome to Great Plains IDEA
2. What to Expect from Your Online Program
3. Resources for Student Success
4. Learning Management Systems (LMS)
5. Writing and Academic Integrity
6. Hear from Our Students

Each module utilized a variety of interactive and engaging formats including videos, quizzes, and interactive question formats, such as hot spots. Students accessed the orientation approximately three weeks before the start of the semester and could complete all components before courses began. Students completed the orientation in thirty to forty minutes.

Key Considerations

Three primary challenges during development were 1) interactive content and 2) accessibility for students at multiple participating universities; 3) brief and informative presentation. Qualtrics provided the solution to these challenges. Quizzes, videos, and hot spots allow students to engage with the content and maintain interest. This orientation, in its readily accessible, interactive format, could accommodate for individual learning styles and was readily accessible 24/7 accommodating time restraints. Qualtrics provided a relatively cost-effective way to design the orientation. As an enterprise system in which institutions invested the cost of development was mainly staff time and expertise.

Concerns identified by students in Great Plains IDEA are echoed in research on student retention. Issues leading to lower retention rates include uncertainty about online learning and difficulties navigating learning management systems (Anderton, 2006; Cho, 2012; Robinson et al., 1996), two main themes in the survey data. Research has shown that online student success can be increased through the implementation of orientation programs (Cho, 2012; Jones, 2013; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). Taylor et al., (2015) addressed the importance of using interactive elements, such as short videos to improve outcomes, and create a more satisfactory experience for students.

New students were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the orientation through questions in the New Student Check-In Survey. Between 2020 and 2023, 715 students completed that survey. Of those who responded to the orientation evaluation questions, the majority strongly agreed or agreed the orientation included enough information without overwhelming them (79%), was easy to navigate and understand (83%), and made them feel more prepared to begin their classes through Great Plains IDEA (62%).

Many online alliances and course share programs could benefit from the development and implementation of an interactive online orientation. Through the adaptation of technologies already available to many, such as Qualtrics, access to these resources is possible for students across multiple universities. When an orientation is developed it is important to consider not only current research on orientating students but also the needs of your students specifically. The Great Plains IDEA orientation aimed to provide important alliance-specific information as well as fill any gaps seen in resources offered by individual participating universities.

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