

Chapter 62

Virtually Onboarding and Supporting Adult Students in College Using Web 2.0 Technologies

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ABSTRACT

The transition to college is a difficult time for most students. Students experience changes in interpersonal and social adjustment, academic and career concerns, as well as personal change (Bishop, Gallagher, & Cohen, 2000). For adult learners this transition can be further complicated by working full-time and family responsibilities. Thus, failure of any student to not successfully adjust and acclimate into his or her new college community can greatly affect the student's persistence and academic success (Tinto, 1993). While most colleges offer a short term in-person orientation to help new traditional-aged students integrate into a college campus, adult students are often left without an option. Though, an alternative method of orienting, acclimating, and supporting adult learners might be realized through the use of virtual and Web 2.0 technologies. Through this method, college staff and faculty members can onboard adult students to campus by virtually interacting, advising, communicating, and supporting them. Additionally, a virtual onboarding program can encourage adults to socialize with their peers and be acclimated to campus support services and offices, in an effort to increase a student's social integration and interaction, academic preparation and success, and college adjustment.

INTRODUCTION

Today, approximately 58 percent of students who enter a four-year institution will persist to earn bachelor degrees within six years (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education

Statistics, 2009). The failure to retain students is often attributed to the lack of opportunities to encourage and allow students to successfully adjust and acclimate into their college community, regardless if it is a brick and mortar or a virtual campus (Tinto, 1993).

While most colleges offer a short term in-person orientation in an effort to help new traditional-aged

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students adjust, integrate, and orient into college; adult learners are often left out of the equation. The rationale might be that adult students do not have the time to commit to attending an in-person orientation due to balancing lives complicated by full-time employment and families. However, in an effort to serve traditional-aged students and adult learners alike, an alternative method to in-person orientation and student support services might be realized by utilizing virtual and Web 2.0 technologies. Orientation is essential in that it provides students with social interaction and integration between classmates, staff and faculty members, as well as introduces students to available student support offices and services.

ACCLIMATION PROCESS

Orientation of Students: A College Perspective

In an effort to better understand why and how adults can be virtually onboarded to college, traditional face-to-face orientation methods must be understood from a college perspective. It is imperative that institutions of higher education orient new students, regardless of age, to life and services on campus and in the classroom. New student orientation is a set of activities with the intended purpose of helping student successfully adjust and acclimate to college. Orientation links the life experienced before college with what life will be like as a student (Gordon & Grites, 1984). The specific purposes of orientation include: (1) highlighting skills necessary for students to conquer the difficult college transition, (2) assisting with academic adjustment, (3) encouraging personal adjustment, commitment, and development, (4) helping families understand the challenges and responsibilities the student will face, (5) creating a sense of community, (6) integrating the student into the campus culture, (7) aiding in providing student with information about the college cam-

pus, student services, activities, policies, and curriculum, and (8) providing social interaction with peers, staff, and faculty members (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perigo & Upcraft, 1989; Twale, 1989). Orientation is often the first face-to-face interaction a new college student will have with the institution upon accepting admission, hence why orientation programs are ranked as the third most successful retention initiative (Beal & Noel, 1980).

The first one-day orientation program was introduced in 1888 at Boston University. It wasn't until 1923, that the University of Maine established the first week-long orientation, which incorporated social activities, counseling, and placement testing. Attrition has been a strategic goal of college administrators since the 1970's, and orientation is viewed as a campus wide integrated event for increasing retention by educating new students about how to experience academic, personal, and social success in college (Upcraft & Farnsworth, 1984).

At most institutions, student orientation takes place prior to the beginning of the fall semester through an in-person venue. Though, in recent years some colleges have tried to implement student orientation via an online format, by using Learning Management Systems (LMS) like Blackboard, eCollege, or Moodle. During the summer students are enrolled in an online orientation course where various aspects of the college culture, history, curriculum, and services are incorporated into weekly lessons and/or threaded discussions. Upon completion, a student's knowledge is tested and a specific score must be earned for the student to officially pass orientation (Miller & Myron, 2003).

Orientation programs are also used to create commitment and affinity to an institution after a student accepts admission, but before he/she starts classes. Orientation has the primary purpose of better preparing student to be successful in college, thus increasing matriculation and reducing the number of students withdrawing (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989; Twale, 1989; Upcraft & Farnsworth,

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