

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A MANDATORY ONLINE STUDENT ORIENTATION

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ABSTRACT

A rural Community College evaluated their procedures for preparing students for online courses and determined they were not meeting the needs of the students. Through the use of the ADDIE Model of Instructional Design, a mandatory online orientation for first time online/hybrid students was developed and implemented. Results from the implementation indicate that after completing the orientation, students feel they are better prepared for their online courses. This result is backed up by an increase in online student retention.

KEYWORDS

Distance learning, orientation, student retention, instructional design

I. DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A MANDATORY ONLINE STUDENT ORIENTATION

The growth of online learning has been tremendous in the last 10 years, but in many cases online course retention is much lower than that of traditional courses [1]. There are many possible reasons for the lower retention rates in online courses including online student demographics, personal characteristics, academic factors, life circumstances, and a lack of prerequisite skills for online success, including technical skills [2]. One way to potentially counter these factors and improve retention is an orientation taken before the start of class [1, 3, 4, 5]. An orientation for online learning can potentially remove many of the technological and soft skill barriers like time management that may prevent the student from concentrating on their coursework, from becoming frustrated, and eventually dropping out of their online course.

II. BACKGROUND

Richland Community College has offered an orientation to its online courses since 1999, a year after the first online course was offered. For the first 10 years it was optional and only offered in a face-to-face format. In 2009, the orientation was put completely online and was made mandatory to all students taking an online or hybrid course for the first time at Richland. The shift to the mandatory online format was implemented after an evaluation of online student preparedness per the ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implement, & Evaluation) model of instructional design. The evaluation was undertaken by Online Learning staff and included feedback from faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, data was gathered from Online Help Desk tickets, online student retention rates, and a review of the literature. Analysis of the evaluation results indicated that the face-to-face orientation was not effective in preparing students for their online courses.

The content of the face-to-face orientation was found to be appropriate, yet the delivery method was not meeting the needs of the students. The face-to-face orientation was optional and many students who would have benefited from the session could not make it to the campus or chose not to attend. The orientation was done at the College on computers that had up-to-date educational software and high speed Internet. When students went home and tried to complete their online coursework, many ran into

problems because their computers lacked the correct software and were not set-up correctly. In addition, the orientation was done in the same manner as a traditional course, with an instructor in the front of the room guiding students through the information and content that they needed to know. When students got into the self-guided online environment, they were easily confused and lacked the knowledge for how to work through their course content on their own. Students also lacked time management, study skills, and the knowledge of what student services were available and how to access them.

III. DEVELOPMENT OF THE ORIENTATION

Using information from the analysis of the evaluation results, a mandatory online student orientation was designed and developed within the College's Learning Management System (LMS). The orientation is provided completely online through the LMS and is available to first time online/hybrid students within an hour of registering for an online or hybrid course. The orientation is self-paced, but requires students to complete some type of interactive activity at the end of each of the 10 learning modules before they can move to the next. The learning modules include topics such as computer requirements, how to be a successful online student, important online student services, navigating the LMS, communicating in the LMS, and submitting assignments in the LMS. The last module is a "Wrap-up" module that requires students to pass a cumulative final with an 80% or better. Students have unlimited attempts at the final assessment, but are not able to access their online or hybrid courses until they successfully complete the orientation.

To ensure the effectiveness of the orientation, it is updated twice each year through the ADDIE process of summative and formative evaluation. This includes reviewing quantitative and qualitative student feedback from the Online Student Orientation evaluation, reviewing data from Online Help Desk tickets, and gathering feedback from faculty & staff.

IV. RESULTS

Since the implementation of the mandatory online orientation, first time online/hybrid Richland students appear to be better prepared for their online courses. Student feedback from the Orientation evaluation found over 90% of students felt the orientation was helpful in preparing them to use the College's LMS. In addition, after completing the orientation, 90% of students felt confident to very confident that their computer was properly configured for an online course, 87% felt confident to very confident in their personal understanding of what it takes to be successful in an online course, and 93% felt confident to very confident in their ability to effectively navigate and use the College's LMS for their online course. Retention in online courses improved after the implementation of the mandatory online orientation (71.8% retention rate pre-orientation compared to 79.5% retention rate post-orientation) and continues to remain between 80-84% three years later. Faculty indicate that students seem more prepared for the online course environment and experience fewer technical issues. The Online Help Desk also has experienced a decrease in the number of help tickets during the first two weeks of the semester.

V. CONCLUSION

Orientations can provide first time online/hybrid students with realistic expectations for their online course environment and provide hands-on practice with the technology that they will be using in their course. The orientation also provides the students with time to work out any potential technology barriers, without the worry of it affecting their academic coursework or grades. Additionally, the orientation allows the students to become more comfortable with the online learning environment.

Specifically, the goals of most orientations are to initially create a sense of welcome, familiarize students with available campus resources, introduce the student to the learning management system that will be used in their course, and increase the student's comfort level with the technology. At Richland Community College, student feedback assisted the institution with the development and enhancement of the mandatory orientation for first time online/hybrid students. Based on anecdotal and empirical data, it appears that a well designed and implemented online orientation—that includes exposure to both

technology and soft skills—can effectively prepare first time online/hybrid students to be successful in their online course and increase retention rates.

VI. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kona Renee Jones is the Director of Online Learning at Richland Community College in Decatur, IL. She holds a M.S. degree from Illinois State University in Quantitative and Cognitive Psychology, as well as undergraduate degrees in Psychology, History, and Biology. She is currently working on her doctoral degree in the Curriculum and Instruction Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where her research focuses on factors related to student retention in online courses. Previously she taught at the community college and university level.

VII. REFERENCES

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