Implementing an Online Student Orientation Program and Support Services for Online Graduate Students

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Pursuing an advanced degree can be a very challenging endeavor, often requiring students to be disciplined, informed, and self-motivated (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Spaulding, 2016). In addition to participating in-class assignments and discussions, students are expected to familiarize themselves with the required technology, understand their degree requirements, create and maintain relationships with classmates, and stay motivated. While these tasks may seem daunting by themselves, online graduate students face even greater difficulties meeting these expectations. Many online students return from the workforce after several years away from school. Without the advantage of face-to-face interactions with their classmates and instructors and lacking proximity to on-campus support services and personnel, online graduate students can often feel confused and isolated (Berry, 2019). This lack of support could lead to lower student satisfaction, reduced academic scores, and higher attrition rates. An online orientation course is one possible approach to help online students cope with these challenges. Properly implemented, an online student orientation (OSO) program could provide the knowledge, support, and social interaction needed to give new online graduate students a solid starting foundation for success.

Problem

On-campus and distance education students are expected to take identical classes but are delivered through different channels. Students attending class on-campus have the luxury of speaking directly to the teacher when they have issues, meeting in person with classmates when they need support, and walking to the financial aid or advising offices when they have questions. Most online students have similar supports in place. However, they must access them through very different channels. It most likely is not a matter of technological capability - Distance education has existed for decades in varying forms, such as television correspondence courses and dial-up internet courses limited to text. Today, Learning Management Systems (LMS) allows students and faculty to immerse themselves in multimedia while working cooperatively to obtain educational and personal goals. Given the technological innovations available today, the question bears asking: are we utilizing our learning technology to provide the best opportunity for students to begin a new online graduate program?

One approach to supporting online graduate students is to rethink a department or college's orientation and support services. Without a properly-executed orientation experience, recently admitted students may enter a program without a clear understanding of program expectations and processes. An online orientation before the start of the first course can provide an opportunity for students to meet with faculty, other classmates, and support service staff. Furthermore, it will allow students to familiarize themselves with the required technology and receive necessary assistance before classes begin. While research on online orientations does exist, it lacks in quantity and diversity (Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard, & Smith, 2015). Furthermore, little comprehensive research exists regarding online orientations and support services for online doctoral students.

Scope of Study

This proposal seeks to add to the existing literature in two ways. First, this research seeks to gather data that explains what students missed or desired in an online orientation and continued support services. This data will come from current and recently graduated online doctoral students. Second, this proposal seeks to collect data and research regarding best practices for building online communities and supporting new online graduate students. This data will be used to drive orientation and support activities. Furthermore, data will be collected from master and undergraduate degree-seeking students for comparison. Differences will be highlighted for future planning considerations.

This proposed study seeks to answer the following three questions:

1. What orientation and support services do current and graduated online doctoral students say would have been beneficial before beginning their program?
2. What are recommendations for building support services to maximize the online community, thereby increasing retention, engagement, and satisfaction?
3. Which tools are effective to increase social presence?

Possible data points may include:

1. Student Survey - self-efficacy; satisfaction; social expectations, and tendencies.
2. Instructor survey - the perception of quality of coursework; time spent on non-course related issues
3. Department/University data - student attrition rates; course/program track data; the average number of semesters to completion or withdrawal

While the steps above hint at the beginning of a multi-stage research project, the ultimate goal of this study is to build an effective online orientation and establish continued support services for an online doctoral program. The final orientation program and support services will be contained within a portal to provide easy access to information for students, faculty, and support staff. Successful implementation of this intervention could produce positive outcomes such as increased student self-efficacy and satisfaction, a more robust social community, and

lowered attrition rates. Additional benefits might include improved portfolio submissions, increased student publications, and streamlining communication between the department and students.

Literature Review

Online learning requires different skills than traditional programs, including self-discipline, time management, and proactive interactions with peers, teachers, and support personnel (Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2014). Additionally, distance education can provide more significant challenges with retention when compared to campus-based education (Brown et al., 2015). Some estimates state that online attrition maybe 10 – 20% higher than attrition in traditional on-campus programs (Berry, 2019).

Research on students in traditional, face-to-face university programs suggests that developing relationships with peers decreases students' chances of dropping out (Berry, 2019). Vincent Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1993), created prior to the evolution of online education, sought to study persistence in higher education. Tinto theorized that students bring their prior associations and expectations to a new school with them, and those who socially integrate into the campus community increase their commitment to the institution and are more likely to graduate (Tinto, 1997). Stated differently, Tinto suggested that students who were unable to integrate into the college community or relate to the university's values were more likely to drop out (Koehnke, 2013). In one study of an online doctoral program, students praised the inclusion of a in-person three-day orientation, comparing it favorably to an online Master's program that lacked the same community level due to the larger class size (Berry, 2015). In addition, students stated that they desired increased engagement with their peers after the in-person orientation. This response suggests that an online orientation program for new distance education graduate students would benefit from some form of community building to combat the risks of attrition.

While Tinto's model seemed to suggest that it was a lack of social community that contributed to dropout, Kember's model of student progress in distance education (1995) points to external factors such as a lack of time, unexpected life events, and other distractions (Koehnke, 2013). Particularly in the case of doctoral programs in the dissertation stage, feelings of isolation, motivation, and program issues may often lead to attrition (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Kember's model suggests that the transition for a new student is likely to be successful if it is made gradually – that is, support is provided as the learner moves from the familiar to the unfamiliar and gradually withdrawn as the learner becomes more experienced (Kember, 1995). Early interventions can be critical for first-time learners (Brown, 2015) and essential for an online orientation program.

Design & Implementation

The first survey implementation and the creation and evaluation of the online student orientation intervention may take a year or more to complete. The first part of the study will consist of information gathering. A survey instrument will be provided to current and past students in an online doctoral program. The survey will probe student institutional expectations, overall satisfaction with the program, student social, community expectations, and academic goals. A second survey may be provided to instructors to gauge their perception of the quality of the coursework assigned, their thoughts on the structure of the overall program, and the amount of time they spend on non-course-related issues. Survey results may be supplemented by available university data, including student attrition numbers, program/track data, and the average number of semesters students take to complete or withdraw from the program. The creation and implementation of these instruments will likely form the bulk of the early work in this study.

Once the data is received and evaluated, work will begin on designing and developing an online student orientation program. Based on the feedback provided in the surveys, the OSO may include in-person orientation sessions, orientation videos, opportunities for community building, and guidance for additional student support. In addition, it should be located in an online portal where students can have easy access to the material to be used as needed.

Evaluation Plan

To evaluate the success of the OSO, once implemented, a new survey will be administered to recent participants to gauge their opinions of the program. Many of the same satisfaction, goal, and expectation questions from the first instrument will be used, along with some newer questions focused on the added interventions. In addition to survey responses, university data will determine academic success (primarily through GPA statistics) and retention rates. Other success measures may include increased use of the proper support channels, improved portfolio submissions, and higher overall quality of doctoral work submitted by students.

Conclusion

A well-implemented online student orientation program can improve student satisfaction, increase student success, foster a sense of belonging in the university community, and reduce student attrition. In addition, a successful student body reflects well on the program they are enrolled in, and providing students with a solid starting foundation and continued support may ultimately benefit everyone involved.

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