Designing Effective Online Orientation Programs for First-Year University Students

by

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B.Sc. (Honours), Dalhousie University, 2012

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Abstract

While asynchronous, self-paced online orientation programs are not brand new in the field of orientation, transition and retention, COVID-19 forced many institutions to rapidly create a program for the first time to help welcome fall 2020 students. Using the community of inquiry model as a framework, this project explores the research related to orientation and online learning in an effort to identify the principles, practices and processes that can help a student affairs professional design an effective and engaging asynchronous online orientation program, or enhance an existing program. This research is presented through a series of blog posts on the website www.onlineOTR.ca.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

Doing a master's degree, particularly during a pandemic, can often feel like a solitary activity. I am forever grateful to the people in my life who made me feel less alone and provided advice, encouragement, a sounding board, and ultimately, a community.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Societal Foundation of the Study

Orientation programs have long been a staple in supporting the transition of students from K-12 to higher education. For traditional students, those aged 18 – 22 years, the transition from high school to university can be daunting. Academic expectations are different, and often more rigorous, a student's social situation has often changed as they navigate new social relationships, and they are often living independently and exploring the adult world for the first time.

While orientation programs have existed for years, as our institutions become more and more focused on student success and retention, orientation programs have evolved and expanded. While orientation, 40 years ago, may have meant attending a one-hour info session, today it often means so much more. Depending on the institution, orientation may look like a one- or two-day summer orientation program, a one- to two-week-long welcome program prior to the first day of classes and/or a bridging program that offers a smaller group of students a summer camp-like experience while teaching them the skills they need to succeed in university. Programs are often interactive and experiential, and may be created for everyone, or geared towards specific populations, such as international students, first-generation students, Indigenous students, etc.

While orientation programs provide a much-needed source of support for first-year students, they often run into a common set of problems. First, they can feel overwhelming to students, which is the opposite of the welcoming feeling they are aiming for. In order to prepare students for the term, an orientation program may share a large amount of information about everything from academics and wellness to how to navigate campus, campus resources, how to pay tuition or get a parking pass and so much more. Because so much information is coming at

students so quickly, they are often not able to retain the information and recall it at the moments throughout the term when it would be most useful. Secondly, orientation programs often require students to be present, in-person, at a specific time and location in order to participate. As our institutions increasingly expand their borders and recruit both international students and domestic students from outside the local region, getting students to attend an in-person program during the summer becomes increasingly difficult. Additionally, as our institutions become more diverse, students increasingly have responsibilities that conflict with attending orientation programming, including work commitments and family obligations.

In recent years, online orientation programs have become increasingly popular. These programs are typically online, asynchronous, self-paced courses that are available to students throughout the weeks or months prior to their first term at the institution. Like the traditional in-person orientation program, online orientation programs may cover a wide variety of topics. However, the online programs allow students to access the program from their own home, on their own schedule, increasing accessibility and allowing students to consume information at their own pace.

For the last 10 years or so, an increasing number of institutions in both Canada and the United States have slowly been developing and implementing online orientation programs. COVID-19 resulted in a sharp increase in the number of institutions offering an online orientation program leading into fall 2020. Many institutions moved all classes online, meaning orientation programming had to move online as well in order to reach students; many institutions who offered face-to-face classes in the fall term also cancelled in-person orientation programs and moved online in an attempt to help reduce the spread of COVID-19. While some institutions may be referring to the online, synchronous orientation programs they are offering this year as

"online orientation," most of these programs are simply a band-aid solution and are unlikely to continue in an online format post-COVID-19. In this paper, the term online orientation will be used to describe online, asynchronous, self-paced courses and programs used for the purpose of orienting new students. These programs existed pre-COVID and will very likely continue to exist post-COVID.

Statement of the Problem

Most student affairs practitioners, when tasked with creating a new online orientation program for their students, have many questions about where to start and what approaches to take. For most practitioners, online learning is not an area of expertise. In the United States, while a master's degree is commonly required for an entry-level student affairs practitioner, very few student affairs-related master's programs offer classes or units related to online learning or online programming. In Canada, where practitioners come to the field from a wide variety of educational backgrounds, much of what we know and think about the field and work of student affairs comes from our own experiences as students, at least at the beginning of our careers. Practitioners base their work on the work that has been done before them, but that foundation rarely exists when it comes to online orientation. Further, student affairs practitioners rarely engage in professional development in the area of online learning and programming; of the eleven competencies laid out in the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services' (CACUSS) *Student Affairs and Services Competency Model*, the technology and digital engagement competency shows up the least in conference and institute programming.

Due to the lack of training and prior experience with online learning, while student affairs professionals embark on creating online orientation programs with the best of intentions, they often lack the skills and knowledge to create effective programs, and often do not know where to

turn for resources and support. While plenty of research exists that could be explored, student affairs is a field where there is often more work to do than hours in the day, and where deadlines cannot be pushed due to the rigid start-of-term dates. Practitioners often have limited time to both gain the skills and knowledge needed for a specific project, and simultaneously execute the project. A concise resource that interprets the online learning literature through the lens of online orientation could help practitioners more readily create effective online orientation programs.

Aims of Study

The research undertaken for this project aims to explore the principles and practices that contribute to effective and engaging online learning in self-paced, asynchronous courses and programs. Specifically, I hope to answer the question:

> *What online learning principles and approaches contribute to designing effective and engaging self-paced, asynchronous online orientation programs that have an impact on student success and retention?*

There is currently a lack of published research relating to online orientation programs for in-person university students. This is partly because such programs are a newer approach to programming in the field. It is also due to the fact that, as most of this work is undertaken by practitioners rather than scholars, best practices are much more likely to be shared at professional conferences rather than in academic journals (Mason, 2010). This study, therefore, does not focus on research related directly to online orientation for in-person students, but reviews research related to: online orientation programs for online students; online self-paced training programs on a variety of topics that could be relevant to a first-year student, including academic integrity, sexualized violence, library instruction, academic skills, mental health, and more; and online learning in higher education more broadly. This research has all been reviewed through

the lens of designing an online, self-paced orientation program, in order to identify principles, practices, and problems that might be transferable. It is hoped that this project will help to bridge the gap between the scholars and the practitioners in this area, and result in the creation of well-designed and impactful online orientation programs for students.

Personal Foundation of Study

For the last 12 years, orientation has played a large role in my life. As a student at Dalhousie University in Halifax, N.S., I joined the Orientation Committee in the summer of 2013, right after my first year. At Dalhousie, Orientation Week was entirely student-run, and I spent both that summer, and the subsequent four summers, planning events, managing student communications, and overseeing orientation leader training. Overseeing orientation leader training led to my first involvement with online training, as in 2012 we moved our traditional breakout sessions on the topics of sexual harassment, diversity, and alcohol to a flipped model of training. Through a collection of pre-existing videos, self-made videos, infographics, and quizzes, we provided our orientation leaders with the required information in an online format and facilitated discussions on the topics during our in-person training sessions.

In 2015, I started working in orientation at Queen's University in Kingston, ON. While the majority of my role at Queen's focused on in-person programming, over my two-and-a-half years there, we steadily increased the amount of online content available to students, both in the summer before their first-year and throughout their first six weeks. We developed a weekly summer webinar series, enhanced our student communication strategy, and piloted a fall webinar series styled after a TV talk show.

During my time at Queen's, the importance and potential of the time prior to a students' arrival at university became increasingly apparent to me. While the field of orientation, transition

and retention (OTR) has historically focused on “the first six weeks” of the term as a time period critical to student success (Mason, 2010), it seemed to me that the six- to eight-week time period between a student’s graduation from high school and arrival at university was when it was easiest to capture a student’s attention. This was when they both had time available and were searching out information about what their experience would be like. This was a time just waiting to be capitalized on for learning and engagement.

In 2018, I was given the opportunity to further explore the possibilities of this pre-arrival period when I moved to Victoria, B.C. to design, develop and implement an online orientation program for the University of Victoria (UVic). I came into the role with lots of ideas about how to create the program, and lots more ideas of what I did not want to do. However, I also came into the role with very little education and background in instructional design and online learning. Throughout the year-and-a-half long process to develop the full program, working closely with colleagues in UVic’s Technology Integrated Learning (TIL) department, I learned so many things that made our program better.

During this time, and especially since almost everyone has had to move their orientation programs online due to COVID-19, I have had lots of conversations with other student affairs practitioners about online orientation. It seems that everyone is full of questions and looking for guidance when it comes to designing and implementing an online orientation program. However, few resources on online learning and engagement exist explicitly for the student affairs practitioner. Additionally, since many institutions, particularly in Canada, create their programs within their institution’s learning management system (LMS), it is difficult to observe the content of other programs for inspiration. It is my hope that this research and the creation of my project will help fill this gap for student affairs practitioners and assist our field with creating

high quality online orientation programs to increase the success and retention of our first-year students.

Search Methodology

From November 2019 to December 2020, I searched for peer-reviewed articles using UVic Summons and the following Boolean terms:

- (e-learning OR "online learning") AND effectiveness AND ("higher education" OR post-secondary OR university OR college)
- orientation AND "self-paced module" AND ("higher education" OR post-secondary OR university OR college)
- "self-paced module" AND (insert topic), where topics included "academic integrity," "sexualized violence OR gender-based violence," "library instruction," "mental health," "time management," and "academic skills"
- motivation AND (e-learning OR "online learning")

When searching for articles, I narrowed the search to articles from the last 10 years (2010 onwards), prioritized Canadian research, and deprioritized articles relating to online modules for healthcare professionals. While some articles were related to using asynchronous, self-paced modules as a training tool in the workforce, as much as possible, I read articles relating to higher education, and first-year students in particular.

While the search methods listed above were the main sources of research used in this project, relevant articles were also found in a few other ways:

- I searched the *Journal of College Orientation, Transition and Retention (JCOTR)* for articles related to online orientation programs. JCOTR is a journal produced by NODA,

the pre-eminent professional association for student affairs professionals working in the field of orientation, transition, and retention.

- Through assigned course readings throughout my master's program
- I mined the reference lists of articles found using the search methods above
- I referred to foundational or seminal works in the field(s), particularly when related to theories, frameworks, and principles of practice.

Project Description

My project will result in the creation of a comprehensive, evidence-based resource for student affairs professionals detailing best practices and principles for creating an online orientation program. The resource, which will take the form of a website at www.onlineotr.ca, will have two major sections: *Explore our program* and *Build your program*.

One of the most common questions I am asked when talking to other student affairs professionals about UVic's online orientation program is "Can I see it?" Unfortunately, because the program is hosted within UVic's LMS, and therefore behind a login, we are unable to give access to practitioners from other institutions. The *Explore our program* section of the website is my attempt to share the content of our program and explain the rationale behind each topic and activity. To the greatest extent possible, all activities will be replicated on the site. For activities that cannot be replicated (i.e., quizzes, polls, etc.), descriptions of the activity will be provided.

The *Build your program* section of the site will consist of a series of blog posts that act as a guide for student affairs professionals who are building an online orientation program for the first time or looking to improve an existing program. The blog posts will lead student affairs professionals through the process of designing, developing and implementing an online orientation program, sharing the things I have learned both through research and practice. The

blog post style of this section of the site will allow me to share foundational information for beginners, while also continuing to share the things I learn as my journey with online orientation continues.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter explores the literature related to orientation and online learning in an effort to identify the principles, practices and processes that can help a student affairs professional to design an effective and engaging online orientation program. I begin with a review of the literature related to orientation programming and explore the emergence of online orientation programs through an analysis of the benefits, challenges, and effectiveness of existing programs. I then look to the literature related to online learning to explore the online learning principles and best practices that can help to create an effective program. Literature directly related to online orientation programs is limited, and the research that does exist is often focused on evaluating the impact of a specific program that an institution has created, rather than examining the impact of various design choices. Much of this literature review, therefore, relies on research relating to other types of online training programs and online learning more broadly, applied through the lens of online orientation and the needs of first-year university students.

Orientation and Online Learning

An Introduction to Orientation

Starting at university is a major period of transition in students' lives. All within the span of a few weeks, students are adjusting to a new environment, encountering a different style of learning along with increased academic expectations and workload, experimenting with their increased independence, negotiating new and changing relationships, and trying to maintain a sense of balance and manage stress (Mason, 2010; Robinson et al., 1996). To help students successfully navigate this transition, many institutions have implemented orientation programs; according to a 2013 NODA survey, 96% of post-secondary institutions offer some type of orientation programming (NODA, 2013). These programs aim to help students understand the

transition, prepare for the start of term, develop necessary skills and knowledge, reduce confusion and anxiety, and increase a students sense of commitment to the institution (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CASHE], 2012; Robinson et al., 1996).

> The definition of an orientation program is quite broad, and includes any deliberate programmatic and service efforts designed to facilitate the transition of new students into the institution; prepare students for the institutions educational opportunities and student responsibilities; initiate the integration of new students into the intellectual, cultural and social climate of the institution; and support the parents, guardians, and children of the new student." (NODA, n.d.)

While historically, orientation may have been as simple as attending a short presentation, or perhaps matching students with a faculty or peer mentor, today, orientation is no longer viewed as an event, but as a comprehensive process that begins once a student has accepted an offer of admission, and may last throughout a student's first term or first year (CASHE, 2012).

While orientation programs can cover a wide variety of topics, they generally help to address three different issues: transition processes, academic integration, and personal and social integration (Robinson et al., 1996).

Transition processes: Any type of transition can be stressful, and the transition to university is no different. Orientation programming can help students navigate this transition by helping them to understand what to expect and by providing them with information that helps to reduce the uncertainty involved in the transition (Robinson et al., 1996). Campus tours and learning about campus support services can help students become familiar with their new environment; talking about the changes that are happening in a student's life can help them to feel as though they are less alone (Robinson et al., 1996).

Academic integration: Students often begin university unprepared for the academic expectations, and unfamiliar with academic processes. Orientation programming often involves information on academic programs and graduation requirements, and may offer academic advising, placement testing, and course registration help. Information about academic expectations and academic success, such as academic integrity, required time commitment and effective study skills is often included (Mason, 2010; Robinson et al., 1996). As academics are a central part of the student experience, they are generally also a central focus in orientation programming.

Personal and social integration: Starting at university means joining a new community. Orientation programming often helps to introduce students to that community by sharing information about the institution's values and behavioural expectations, and introducing students to the wide variety of supports and services available on campus (Robinson et al., 1996). Orientation also helps students meet other members of the community, providing opportunities to meet other new students as well as current students, who often serve as orientation leaders, and university staff (CASHE, 2012). Orientation is also a time to begin introducing topics relevant to student life, such as substance use, mental health, sexualized violence, and diversity. How an institution approaches these topics can both help students adjust to campus life, and demonstrate an institution's values and desired campus culture (Mason, 2010; Robinson et al., 1996).

The delivery of orientation programming can, and should, vary drastically from institution to institution. Every institution is different and has different goals. The best orientation programs are those that demonstrate a strong understanding of the institution's mission and culture, and of the needs of their student population (Mason, 2010; Robinson et al.,

1996). Still, delivery methods can be grouped into a few different categories. Many institutions offer a one- or two-day program in the summer prior to a student's first term. These programs, which sometimes involve an overnight stay, often focus on academic advising and course registration, familiarizing students with the campus and available resources and supports, and helping students understand what to expect once the term begins (Robinson et al., 1996). Welcome Week programming is also fairly common, where institutions offer up to a full week of programming in the days immediately prior to the first day of classes. This type of programming is often focused on helping students make connections with peers, develop academic success skills, and explore more in-depth a variety of student life issues (NODA, n.d.; Robinson et al., 1996). Orientation programming often does not end just because classes have begun; many institutions continue to offer social programming and academic workshops or have mentorship programs to provide students with continued support. Some institutions offer student success courses, either for-credit or non-credit, with some institutions requiring that all students take such a course in their first year (NODA, n.d.; Robinson et al., 1996). In more recent years, as institutions have spent more time and resources recruiting and retaining specific populations of students, such as international, Indigenous, and low-income students, they have also begun offering orientation programs specifically for those populations, in order to ensure their specific needs are addressed. While much less common, some institutions will also offer outdoor or wilderness orientation programs, where groups of new students will spend a defined period of time camping together, or summer bridge programs, which often provide students with an opportunity to brush up on academic skills they may be lacking prior to the start of term (NODA, n.d.).

Increasingly, orientation is seen as not only a program to support students, but also a major part of an institution's enrollment management strategy (Mason, 2010). As tuition prices increase and competition to attract students intensifies, institutions are increasingly being held accountable for the success of their students, which is often measured by the retention and graduation rates of students (Chan, 2017). A successful transition to university is critical to retaining a student; a student who does not successful integrate academically, personally, and socially into the university environment within the first six weeks of their first term has a much higher likelihood of departure before the end of the year than a student who does successfully integrate (Mayhew et al., 2010). As a major goal of orientation programming is to help facilitate a student's transition to university, orientation programs are often viewed as a tool to positively impact and influence retention (CASHE, 2012).

The Emergence of Online Orientation

As technology and online learning have become more prevalent over the past decade, new ways of orienting students have evolved to make use of these technologies. Institutions have begun to take advantage of the web, email, and social media to assist with the transition of new students to the institution. Most notably, they have begun to develop online orientation programs to enhance, supplement, or replace their more traditional in-person programs. According to a 2013 NODA survey, 26% of institutions offered some sort of online orientation program, with 18% of institutions offering an online orientation for first-year students, while others offered programs for transfer students, international students, graduate students, or specific student populations (NODA, 2013).

For many institutions, online orientation programs began as a way to offer orientation programming to online learners. As this group of students were often studying from a distance,

typically chose this delivery method for its convenience and scheduling flexibility, offering an in-person orientation program for online learners was rarely a suitable option. Early versions of these programs often focused on introducing students to program requirements, the technology they would require to complete their courses, and campus resources and supports. More recently, these programs have also begun to address the academic skills that students need to be successful in online courses (Watts, 2019).

Online orientation programs also offered institutions a way to increase the accessibility of the in-person programs they offered during the summer prior to the first term. As institutions increasingly recruit international students and out-of-province or state students, it becomes more difficult. In 2013, 68% of institutions who offered an online orientation program did so to provide an alternate option for an in-person program (NODA, 2013). These programs generally mirror the content of the in-person programs, focusing on academic program information, course registration, and an introduction to student life.

A growing trend, particularly in Canada, is to offer an online orientation program as an additional orientation program for students, increasing the support options available. Depending on the institution, these programs may cover a wide variety of topics, including academic success, health and wellness, mental health, sexualized violence, substance use, academic integrity, and campus life. These programs are sometimes used to deliver content that is often less engaging in an in-person format, but still considered important for a new student to know. NODA reported that in 2013, 30% of institutions who offered an online orientation program were offering it in addition to an in-person program (NODA, 2013).

Online orientation is the use of information technology, such as a website, the LMS, or other software products, to provide instruction and disseminate information and knowledge that

assists students with the transition to university (Cidral et al., 2018; Mayer, 2017). Typically, online orientation programs are delivered as asynchronous, self-paced, modular courses. As with in-person orientation programming, the content of an online orientation program can differ between institutions depending on their goals; some programs will focus on program information, course registration, and introducing students to campus resources, while other may aim to teach students academic skills, develop a budget, prevent sexualized violence, make good choices about substance use, manage their mental health, and more student life and development topics. Similarly, institutions may differ in how they deliver content within the program, with options including text, images, video, quizzes, interactive activities, discussion boards, and more.

Benefits and Challenges of Going Online

An online orientation program can offer many benefits to both an institution and its students, while also presenting several challenges. An online orientation program offers convenience for students, and can increase and expand the accessibility of orientation programming (Etherington et al., 2017; Means et al., 2013). By removing the requirement to be in a designated place at a designated time, access is no longer restricted by geographic area, scheduling conflicts, or availability. Students from outside the local area no longer need to take the time or spend the money to travel to the institution to attend programming, and all students are able to schedule their participation in the program around the demands of their job and life. Taking orientation online also allows the program to function as not just an event, but as an ongoing resource, where students are able to revisit content whenever they need (Gayed et al., 2018; Korstange et al., 2020).

An online orientation program may also offer the opportunity to create a more learner-centred experience than a traditional in-person program can. Learners can choose when they

want to engage in the learning opportunity, can work at their own pace, spending more time on content they deem important or find confusing, and less time on content they do not, or can skip sections of the program they feel will not be helpful (Baker & Etherington, 2016; Etherington et al., 2017; Strother, 2002). Online orientation programs can also provide an opportunity for students to experience a variety of different learning activities, interact with the content being taught, and receive immediate feedback on their learning, something that is not always possible in a large-scale orientation program (Ard & Ard, 2019; Jacklin & Robinson, 2013; Means et al., 2013).

Offering an online orientation program can also be beneficial for the institution. While there may be a large initial investment required to get the program up and running, an online orientation can be less expensive over time than a comparable in-person program (Baker & Etherington, 2016; Means et al., 2013). The staff time and resources needed to update and run an online orientation program every year is generally less than what is needed to plan and run in-person programming. Recurring costs associated with hiring session facilitators and orientation leaders, booking space on campus, and hiring a caterer are no longer needed (Baker & Etherington, 2016; Jacklin & Robinson, 2013). An online orientation program can be used many different times, for different student intakes, without requiring many changes. Much of the work involved in running an online orientation program happens prior to a program launching, leaving orientation staff available to respond to student needs and requests instead of focusing on program logistics (Gayed et al., 2018). Finally, online orientation programs can facilitate the tailoring of content to different student populations (Korstange et al., 2020). For example, transfer students or international students can be shown only the content that is relevant to them, or additional content that is relevant to them, with only the click of a button. Overall, an online

orientation program can be a more flexible, time-effective and economical means of providing programming to a large number of students than an in-person program (Gayed et al., 2018).

Implementing an online orientation program is not without its challenges and drawbacks, however. Designing an online program often requires a different skill set than planning an in-person program. Instead of dealing with scheduling and logistics, the student affairs professional needs to be familiar with technology, instructional design, and online learning. Even if they are working with IT, a learning designer, or an outside software company, it is likely that they will need to have some knowledge of the software platform, of the technology and processes involved in creating audio, graphics, video, screencasting, and more, and of digital accessibility (Jacklin & Robinson, 2013). Online orientation programs also generally offer less opportunity for peer connection than in-person programs. They rarely help students to make connections with other students and do not often help students connect with university staff for assistance and answers to questions (Jacklin & Robinson, 2013). Finally, online orientation programs often require a commitment from students that in-person programs do not. While the flexibility these programs provide is a benefit in many ways, it also means that students must rely entirely upon themselves to complete the program. While a student may receive emails reminding them to complete the program, there is not an instructor or orientation staff member dictating when and where they will work through the program, requiring motivation and planning on the part of the student (Taylor, 2015). Additionally, most online orientation programs lack a clear and tangible motivator, like a grade or credit towards degree completion, which enhances the difficulty an institution may have in getting students to complete the program. The lack of a clear and tangible motivator is a major difference between an online orientation and most other online courses or training programs.

Effectiveness of an Online Orientation Program

The effectiveness of online learning has been studied across a wide range of fields and content areas, from health to business to library sciences and more. Across all content areas, online learning has been found to be an effective format for knowledge acquisition and attitude improvement (Baker & Etherington, 2016). Learners who participate in an online learning opportunity demonstrate increased knowledge after completing the course as compared to before, and/or increased knowledge in comparison to a similar group who did not participate in the learning opportunity (Etherington et al., 2017).

Not only has online learning been found to be an effective format for knowledge acquisition and attitude improvement, but it has also been found to be, at minimum, equally as effective as traditional, face-to-face learning (Etherington et al., 2017; Means et al., 2013; Ramage, 2002). In 1999, a researcher named Thomas Russell catalogued over 300 research studies that compared learning outcomes from online learning and face-to-face learning, and found that in the vast majority of cases, there was no significant difference found in student outcomes between the two different methods of course delivery (Conger, 2005; Lievrouw, 2001; Ramage, 2002; Strother, 2002). This finding is commonly referred to as the "no significant difference phenomenon." Russell has continued to catalogue studies since the publication of his 1999 book.

Research in several different areas of online learning provides support for the potential effectiveness of online orientation programs. As mentioned previously, depending on the institution, online orientation programs might cover a wide range of topics including academic skills, academic integrity, mental health, substance use, and information literacy. Online modules and programs that focused specifically on similar topics, such as academic skills (Brown et al.,

2008; Moore et al., 2014), academic integrity (Benson et al., 2019), mental health (Gayed et al., 2018), substance use (Beeson et al., 2019), sexualized violence (Etherington et al., 2017), and information literacy (Ard & Ard, 2019; Jacklin & Robinson, 2013; Marineo & Shi, 2019), have been found to be effective at conveying the desired learning, and result in student satisfaction. Online orientation programs for online learners, which often focus on program requirements, technology required for online learning, and available supports and services, have been found to increase a student's sense of readiness (Jones, 2013; Liu, 2019), decrease the number of technology problems encountered throughout a course (Jones, 2013), and in some cases, students who completed the program ended the year with a higher grade point average (GPA) and retention rate as compared to students who did not complete the program (Jones, 2013; Taylor, 2015). Additionally, in student surveys, students indicated that the programs were helpful and that they were satisfied with their experience (Taylor, 2015).

While research on online orientation programs for in-person students is limited, two different studies independently demonstrate the impact and effectiveness of these programs. *Leg UP* is a six-module online orientation program for health studies students at Western University. The program aims to expose students to content they will later see in their university courses, discuss student health and future careers, and help students develop university skills such as online communication skills, multiple choice assessments, time management, writing at the university level, and reading scholarly articles. *Leg UP* participants achieved higher grades and achieved higher scores on the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) as compared to non-participants, indicating the program was useful in helping students have a successful transition (Hanna-Benson, 2019). Separately, an online orientation program offered at a mid-size community college in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States resulted in a higher fall-to-

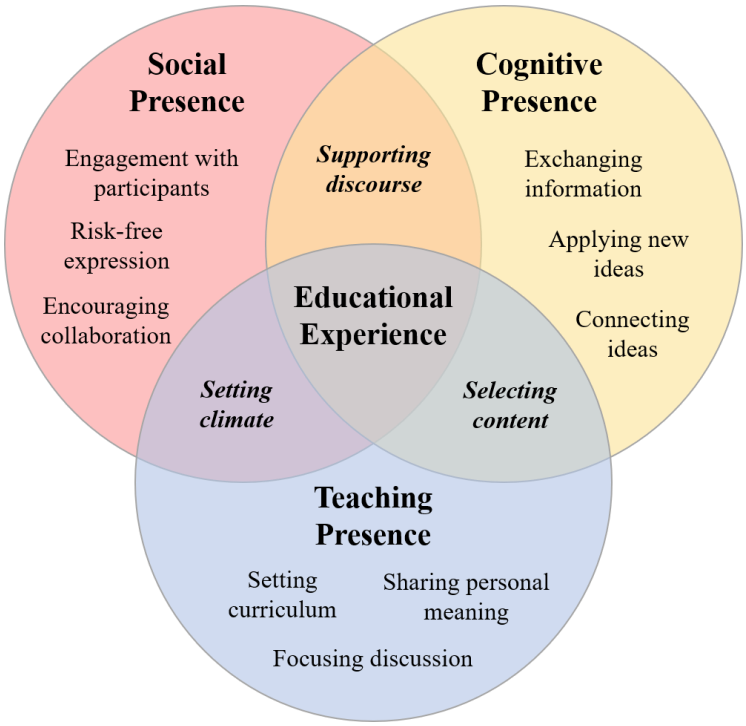
spring retention rate and first semester GPA for students who completed the program as compared to those who did not (Colucci & Grebing, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

There is a large and wide-ranging amount of advice about online learning available today. However, much of that advice, when used in isolation, will only be minimally useful. That same advice, when used under the umbrella of a more comprehensive online learning framework, can be much more impactful. The community of inquiry model (Figure 1) is one such framework and forms the foundation of both this literature review and the larger project. While this model is most commonly used in the design of higher education courses, it has also been used in an online training environment (Singleton, 2019) and for online orientation programs (Watts, 2019).

Figure 1

The Community of Inquiry Model. Adapted from "Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education" by D.R. Garrison, T. Anderson, and W. Archer, (1999), The Internet and Higher Education, *2(2), 87-105.*



The community of inquiry model is a popular conceptual framework that aims to identify the important factors in a quality online learning experience (Garrison et al., 1999). The model outlines three main, broad factors that are crucial: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence, and posits that learning occurs through the interaction of these three elements. Teaching presence refers to the design of the teaching components of the course, including the organization and selection of course content, facilitation of learning, and direct instruction. Social presence refers to the ability of learners to be themselves while participating in the course, and to connect with others. Cognitive presence relates to the intellectual and mental effort and processes required for learning, and the active engagement of learners in their learning. These three presences will be further defined, and best practices to enhance these presences will be explored, in the remainder of this literature review.

Teaching Presence (or, Setting Up Your Course)

Teaching presence is defined as "the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing…learning outcomes" (Joo et al., 2011, p. 1655). For an online, asynchronous, self-paced course, teaching presence is created through the design and management of the course, and includes components such as the design and organization of the course platform, the creation of learning activities, and communication with learners (Garrison et al., 1999; Joo et al., 2011; Marks et al., 2005). In an online orientation program, teaching presence is essentially the invisible hand guiding students through the course and facilitating their learning. While a learner may never meet or directly interact with the instructor, every decision the instructor makes when creating the course will impact the learner's experience. To ensure a learner can successfully navigate a course and remain focused on the learning content, it is important that time and attention are dedicated to concepts including usability, user-interface

design, help and support, and visual design/aesthetic (V. Cho et al., 2009; Cidral et al., 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2019). Teaching presence also relates to the design of learning activities, but as this touches on both teaching presence and cognitive presence, that discussion will be left to later in this literature review.

Choosing a Platform

Choosing an online learning platform for a course to live within is an important decision, as the platform can impact usability, access, assessment, the types of activities available, cost, and more. Generally, there are three categories that the platform used to host online orientation programs fall into: a website, the institution's LMS, or a software product (Chan, 2017). Each option comes with its own pros and cons. A website offers the ability to share text, images, and video in a structured format, but unless advanced plug-ins or additional technology tools are being used, it offers limited interactivity when it comes to polls, quizzes and activities. Since a typical website does not require a login, it does not offer the ability to track individual user's behaviour. A website-based online orientation program may also blend in to the institutional website, if not given a visual identity that differentiates it as a unique program (Chan, 2017). Using the institution's LMS means that the course is hosted in the same system that students will be using for their academic courses, allowing students to gain familiarity with the system ahead of time. The LMS allows for the use of text, images, videos, polls, quizzes and surveys, as well as other features, depending on the LMS, and often can track user behaviour in many ways, including measuring the number of logins, completion of activities, and time spent per activity. However, LMSs can sometimes be rigid and inflexible in how they are structured, and are also more restrictive when it comes to access, as they often require an institutional login (van Mourik Broekman et al., 2014). Software products are often used for online orientation when an

institution has chosen to work with an external vendor who specializes in this area. These products are typically well-designed and visually appealing, allow for text, images, video, polls, quizzes, and surveys, and connect with institutional systems for the purpose of data tracking. For some, these products can be cost-prohibitive; the initial set-up fee and the yearly subscription can cost tens of thousands of dollars. These products can also be rigid and inflexible in how they are structured, often deliver content quite linearly, and can also be restrictive when it comes to access, requiring a login.

Usability

To best support participation with an online orientation program, the course needs to have a high degree of usability. Usability is "the extent to which a product can be used to reach a certain goal effectively, efficiently, and satisfyingly" (Heidig et al., 2015, p. 82). Essentially, it is a measure of how easily learners can complete the tasks associated with completing the course, such as enrolling in the course platform, navigating through the course, uploading assignments, posting in forums, watching video clips, or submitting quiz answers (Gamage et al., 2015; Long et al., 2009). Learners who complete all these tasks with ease are more likely to be satisfied with the course, while those who struggle are less likely to be motivated to engage with course content, and less likely to finish the course (V. Cho et al., 2009; Long et al., 2009). While usability is important for every online course, it has been found to matter more in short, intensive courses, such as an online orientation, as learners are unwilling to invest much time in learning a system they will only be using briefly (Mulvaney, 2020).

A large component of the usability of a course is dictated by the design of the user-interface (the portion of the course that a user sees and interacts with as they navigate through the course) and the organization of course content (V. Cho et al., 2009). A well-designed course

minimizes the amount of effort a learner needs to expend when using a system by providing a clear picture of what is required to complete the course and by making course navigation easy. The layout of the course should ensure all content, activities and features are easy to access, not hidden in hard-to-find places, and navigating from one piece of content to the next should be a clear and easy process (Chan, 2017; V. Cho et al., 2009; Heidig et al., 2015). Information should be organized logically, with related things grouped together, and unrelated things separated out (V. Cho et al., 2009). These groupings should be made clear using headings, page breaks and visual indicators of separation, such as lines or boxes. It is also important that the course content be presented in a way that allows a learner to have an overview of all the modules and topics that are being covered and fully grasp the structure of the course; sub-topics should also be made obvious to the learner right from the homepage (Eaton et al., 2018; Janicki & Liegle, 2001). Finally, the system should provide clear and obvious information about a learner's progress in the course; it should be easy to identify which activities have been completed and which remain, and how much work a learner has left to do (V. Cho et al., 2009).

Usability is not only about navigating the online learning system, but also about understanding how to complete the activities within the program. Providing clear instructions is critical (Jacklin & Robinson, 2013). Learners need to understand what they are being asked to do within an activity, from a learning and application perspective, and then also be provided with instructions on how to do that within the learning system. For example, if a learner is completing an activity that requires them to play a price matching game, similar to those found on *Price is Right*, it is important that the learner understands that the intent of the activity is for them to match an item with its correct price, and it is also important that the learner understands how they indicate the match (i.e., drag and drop, clicking on the item and price sequentially, etc.).

Instructions often need to be clearer in an online environment than they would need to be to complete an equivalent activity in-person, as the learner often has less contextual clues available, cannot easily observe how their peers are completing the activity, and does not have immediate access to an instructor to ask for clarification (Jacklin & Robinson, 2013). Additionally, learners are often less comfortable asking questions in an online environment, as they often have no relationship with or knowledge of the person they are sending the question to; they are simply sending it out into cyberspace and hoping for a response (Janicki & Liegle, 2001). They are therefore less likely to ask clarifying questions, and will instead choose to muddle through, making guesses as to what they are being asked to do, which negatively impacts their learning, or they simply abandon the activity altogether.

Mitigating Technology Problems

With any online course, technology problems are always a possibility, and it is important to take steps to mitigate any possible problems before launching a course. If a learner regularly encounters technology problems throughout a course, their ability to learn course content and meet course objectives is at risk (Karthik et al., 2019). They may skip content or sections of the course, or give up on completing the course altogether (Long et al., 2009). For learners who were not feeling particularly motivated to begin with, technology problems greatly increase the likelihood they will abandon a course (Cidral et al., 2018).

There are several steps that instructors can take to mitigate technology problems in their course. Instructors should be careful when choosing technology tools, and ensure they work on a variety of devices and are not prone to system crashes (Heidig et al., 2015). They should also be careful not to overload course pages with too many media files, such as images, videos, and audio clips. This content tends to extend the loading time of pages, which can negatively affect

both learner satisfaction and usability (Heidig et al., 2015). If a page takes longer than 10 seconds to load, a learner may lose interest or believe there is an error, and will leave the page rather than waiting (Heidig et al., 2015). A learner's tolerance for waiting decreases the longer they interact with the system (Heidig et al., 2015). A course should also be rigorously tested before going live.

It is unlikely that an instructor can eliminate every possible technology problem, so it is important that technical assistance is readily available (Karthik et al., 2019). This might look like proactively identifying possible issues and providing solutions in a frequently asked questions (FAQ) page, creating a discussion board where learners can post technology questions and get solutions from the instructor or fellow learners, or encouraging learners to take a virtual tour of the course environment before the course begins and proactively solve any problems they encounter (Karthik et al., 2019).

Visual Design

Most instructors are not user experience designers, nor do they typically have extensive graphic design experience. However, it is important for instructors to be aware that the look and feel of their course and course activities matters (Karthik et al., 2019). Pages should be designed to be visually appealing, and thought should be given to colours, shapes, fonts, and white space. A visually appealing design triggers the learner's stimuli, which increases the time the learner spends on the page. It also leads learners to believe that the course is easily navigable, and that usability will be high, which positively affects a learner's intentions with regard to engaging in the course, as well as their usage behaviour (Karthik et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2007).

The final reason an instructor should pay attention to the look and feel of an online learning course comes from a relatively new field of study: emotional design. The design of

online learning materials can evoke emotions in learners, both positive and negative, that can impact the learning process (Heidig et al., 2015). As Heidig (2015) describes: “Objective system qualities, such as layout, content, structure and design lead to subjective perceptions of these qualities, an emotional response in the user, and to behavioural response” (p. 82). Positive emotions can increase motivation, creativity, and problem-solving, and have been found to predict high achievement (Heidig et al., 2015). Learners in one emotional design study who were exposed to the positive design (warm colours and face-like shapes) perceived the learning materials as less difficult, invested more mental effort, reported higher levels of motivation and satisfaction, and had higher comprehension and transfer performance as compared to learners who were exposed to the neutral design (gray colours and no face-like shapes; Um et al., 2012). As this field is still in its infancy, it may be a bit much at this point to expect instructors to be able to adjust small details in order to increase positive emotion. However, the broader takeaway is still important: design can influence emotion, which can influence learning.

Cognitive Presence (or, Content Creation)

The second factor in the community of inquiry model is cognitive presence, the “exploration, construction, resolution and confirmation of understanding” (Joo et al., 2011, p. 1655). In other words, cognitive presence is the intellectual and mental effort and processes required for learning. Cognitive presence elevates a learning experience past the passive intake of information that will soon be forgotten to an experience that is actively engaging, often through collaboration or reflection, and will result in better long-term retention (Garrison et al., 1999). In an online orientation program, cognitive presence is largely created through the design and delivery of content and learning activities.

Creating Content and Learning Activities

In an online learning environment, there are lots of different ways to structure and deliver content. Instructors can choose to use strategies such as storytelling, problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, direct instruction, or gamification, and learning activities can be delivered via a variety of different media, such as text, images, video, podcasts, or interactive activities (Arghode et al., 2018; Karthik et al., 2019). These interactive activities can be built using features of an LMS or using software such as Kaltura, H5P or Articulate 360. Table 1 outlines the structure and chosen approach to learning activities for several different online training and online orientation programs.

Table 1

Structure of Different Online Training and Orientation Programs

Paper	Topic	Structure	Learning activities
Ard & Ard, 2019	Library instruction	2 modules, 20 minutes each; final test	Narrated slides (using Adobe Captivate), written responses, interactive drag-and-drop games and real-life scenarios
Beeson et al., 2019	Substance use	10 self-paced modules; 4-6 hours total	Brief video lectures, personal stories, reflection prompts, module quizzes
Benson et al., 2019	Academic integrity	4 modules; summative quiz	Designed using the Articulate 360 software suite, which offers several embedding features and pre-built interactions such as card sorting, flashcards, knowledge checks, click-through processes, and pre-built timeline features

Brown et al., 2008	Academic writing	6 modules	Audio-visual learning presentations
Cho, 2012	Online orientation for online learners	4 modules, each with 2-5 subtopics	Developed web pages using HTML code and embedded into Blackboard
Etherington et al., 2017	Sexualized violence	4 units; 8 topics total	No information
Gayed et al., 2018	Mental health	15 10-minute modules categorized into 3 topic areas	Text, short videos, practical activities, topic summary exercises
Hanna-Benson, 2019	Online orientation	6 modules	Graphics, videos and interactive activities in Articulate Storyline
Jones, 2013	Online orientation for online learners	10 modules; cumulative final	Each module has an interactive activity
Liu, 2019	Online orientation for online learners	5 modules	Text, images, videos, embedded self-directed learning activities, discussion posts, assignment submission, quiz
Taylor, 2015	Online orientation for online learners	No information	Short video tutorials (<4 min) that include interactive self-assessments; built using Articulate Storyline and Camtasia Studio
Watts, 2019	Online orientation for online learners	3 modules; pre-post assessment	10-minute video and accompanying blog post, discussion board, two-page response paper to a study

When considering the type of media to use for learning activities, the choice should be made based on the pedagogical approach desired and the resources and expertise available to

design and implement the activity. While we often default to wanting to use newer forms of media, and implicitly think they may be superior, the choice of medium actually does not influence learning, unless it is changing the pedagogical approach (Clark, 1994; Clark & Feldon, 2014). Where possible, activities should promote active learning and interaction; however instructors should take caution in ensuring they are not carried away by the technology and the features of their online learning system, and remain focused on the pedagogical aspects of their content delivery (Ard & Ard, 2019; Drago et al., 2002; Rodrigues et al., 2019). Depending on the medium chosen, there are additional design considerations that an instructor should keep in mind when creating the learning activity.

Text. Text often forms part of an online course, either as a stand-alone activity type, or as part of other media. While text can be an effective means to convey information and promote learning, many learners prefer multimedia courses, and will express dissatisfaction with text-based courses (Clark & Feldon, 2014). This dissatisfaction likely has more to do with which medium they think provides the easier path to achievement as opposed to which results in greater learning. However, in a course that learners are completing voluntarily, this is still an important consideration.

Text in online courses should be written in an informal, conversational tone, and be written in first person, speaking directly to the learner. This allows the learner to feel connected to what is being said, and allows the learner to more easily incorporate the knowledge into their existing schema, resulting in better learning (Ard & Ard, 2019; Benson et al., 2019; Clark & Feldon, 2014). Text should also be written in short paragraphs and short sentences, and make use of headings, so as to help the learner follow the narrative and not get lost on the page.

Video. When creating instructional videos, it is important to ensure the video is engaging so that it will be viewed in its entirety. To ensure that the learner is focused on the content of the video, and not various features of the video, videos should have high quality audio, images should be clear and well-lit, and busy screens should be avoided (Weeks & Davis, 2017). Videos should be focused on one specific topic and be kept to 2–3 minutes in length. Shorter videos will be more liked to be viewed to the end, and reduce the cognitive load for a learner, allowing them to more fully digest one subject before being introduced to another (Weeks & Davis, 2017). The beginning of a video should clearly state the learning objective so that a learner knows what to expect and can decide whether they wish to watch the video; this introduction should be kept short and to the point so as not to lose a viewer before the video even begins addressing the content (Weeks & Davis, 2017). Finally, the narrator or presenter should speak with enthusiasm and in a conversational manner, rather than sounding like they are reading from a script, and if possible, allow their image to appear on-screen. This will help to create more of a social connection with the learner (Mayer, 2017).

Multimedia. Learning activities in an online course are often delivered via some form of multimedia, meaning some combination of words and pictures. The words may be either spoken or narrated, and the pictures may be either static, such as illustrations, diagrams, maps and photos, or dynamic, such as animations or video. While multimedia can be an effective learning tool, it can also overwhelm a learner with too much information and stimuli if not created carefully. When designing multimedia for learning purposes, it is important to ensure that decisions are made that help learners with the cognitive processes of selecting, organizing and integrating knowledge without overloading the visual and verbal channels in working memory (Mayer, 2017). Instructors should aim to reduce extraneous processing, manage essential

processing, and foster generative processing. Several principles have been identified to help in each of these areas.

In any multimedia learning activity, extraneous processing, defined as any cognitive processing that the brain is required to do that is not directly related to the learning objective, should be reduced, if not eliminated. While instructors may be tempted to include fun, interesting details in their lessons, according to the coherence principle, students learn better when extraneous material is excluded, as that material then does not take up space in their working memory (Mayer, 2017). Students also learn better when essential material is highlighted, whether it is via headings, bolding words, or actual highlighting, as this will draw a learner's attention to what is most important, and help to show the organization of material (Mayer, 2017). When using graphics or diagrams, any explanatory words should be placed next to the corresponding part of the graphic, and any narration should be presented simultaneously instead of sequentially, in order to make the connection explicit (Mayer, 2017).

Essential processing refers to the cognitive processing required to mentally represent the required material (Mayer, 2017). Essential processing is caused by the complexity of the learning material; any steps that can be taken to reduce the complexity will increase learning. Segmenting content, incorporating pre-training, and narrating graphics are all ways to reduce this complexity (Mayer, 2017). Segmenting involves breaking the lesson into small, user-paced chunks, the smaller the better. This allows a learner to digest one chunk of information before moving on (Mayer, 2017). Pre-training involves teaching the learner the key terminology used in the lesson prior to receiving the lesson. The learner will then be able to focus on the content, and building connections between knowledge, instead of on what various terms mean (Mayer, 2017).

Generative processing refers to cognitive processing that is aimed at making sense of the material, or understanding the material more deeply (Mayer, 2017). Any elements of a lesson that can prime a social stance in a learner enhance generative processing. For example, students learn better when words are presented in a conversational style, rather than formally; when they are listening to a human voice rather than a machine-like voice; and when an on-screen agent uses human-like gestures and movements (Mayer, 2017).

Providing Feedback

Feedback is a crucial element in an online learning course, and is essential for self-motivation (Marks et al., 2005; Mulvaney, 2020). Feedback can sometimes be built into activities within the online learning system, and at other times will need to come after an activity has been reviewed by the instructor. In all cases, learners should be provided with a timeframe in which they should expect to receive feedback, and this feedback should be provided as quickly as possible (Arghode et al., 2018; Joo et al., 2011). Using embedded questions within a learning activity, or having a short quiz at the end of a module, can be an efficient and effective means of checking learner understanding and providing feedback (Chan, 2017; Clark & Feldon, 2014). Ideal feedback will be more than just "correct/incorrect." Learners should be informed as to why their answer is wrong, provided with an explanation of any errors they have made, and in some cases, reminded of the goal of the exercise (Clark & Feldon, 2014; Janicki & Liegle, 2001). If a learner seems to be struggling to figure out the correct answer, they should be given hints. Feedback should be justifiably critical, but also contain elements of support and positive reinforcement (Marks et al., 2005; Paechter et al., 2010). Finally, feedback should be provided in complete sentences, and presented in the same location and in the same format for every question (Janicki & Liegle, 2001).

Social Presence (or, Community Building)

Social presence, the final factor in the community of inquiry model, refers to "the ability of participants to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 32). Social presence allows learners to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings and experiences with their peers, and shifts online learning away from being a simple process of downloading information towards an experience that creates a real feeling of community (Garrison et al., 1999; Joo et al., 2011). In the context of an online orientation program, social presence may relate to creating peer-to-peer connections, allowing space for vulnerability within the course, and connecting learners to the larger university community.

Creating Peer-to-Peer Social Connections

Social connection and peer-to-peer learning have both been found to be important aspects of a quality online learning experience. Social connection can enhance a learner's satisfaction with the course, their perception of learning outcomes, their level of interaction and their motivation (Montgomerie et al., 2016). Social connection and peer-to-peer learning can be built into an online course in many ways, including peer review, discussion boards and collaborative projects (Hall, 2015; Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Karthik et al., 2019). However, many of these methods of social connection may lend themselves more readily to 12-week academic courses rather than self-paced, asynchronous modules. Peer review is difficult to set-up in a self-paced course, as students will not be completing activities at the same time, and since the course is not being graded, students would have little incentive to invest time and energy in the peer review process. Further, since all learners in an online orientation program are in the same position of never having attended university, any valuable advice or insight they would be able to offer their

peers would be limited. Collaborative projects in an online orientation program would have many of the same drawbacks as peer review: difficult to set-up due to the self-paced nature, and students would likely have little incentive to invest time and energy in the activity.

Discussion boards are a common activity type used in self-paced asynchronous courses and can be beneficial when asking students to reflect on what they have learned and share insights. However, in self-paced asynchronous courses, discussion boards rarely work to connect learners with each other and create social presence (Liu, 2019). While students have the option to read and respond to the posts of other learners, they rarely do. Liu (2019) attributes this to the self-paced nature of the course, where students are unlikely to return to a previous activity to see what has been posted in the weeks since they completed the activity, and to the fact that course participation is voluntary.

Incorporating Student Voice

With online orientation programs, helping students connect to the broader university community through the program may be more successful than helping them connect with other students within the program. The goal may need to shift from creating a community within the course, toward welcoming students to a community within the institution. Incorporating the voices of current students into the program can help accomplish this goal.

One of the most influential aspects of many in-person orientation programs is the role that the orientation leader plays (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012). Orientation leaders are typically upper-year students at the institution, and they often lead new students through orientation programming, sharing their own personal student experiences, providing advice, and answering questions that new students may not feel comfortable asking a university staff member (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012; Richardson & Tate, 2013). Finding ways to incorporate upper-year students

into an online orientation program can add immense value, whether it is through video, student profiles, quote bubbles, or other methods. When Chan (2017) reviewed 20 online orientation programs from across the United States, he found that many used current students in their videos. However, it is not enough to simply use students as narrators, reading off a script written by the institution. Students must be able to speak in their own voice and share their own personal experiences if they are to have a similar impact to the traditional orientation leader.

Incorporating the voices of current students into an online orientation program can have many benefits. Peers play an overwhelmingly positive role in students' lives and post-secondary experiences (Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018). Most notably, upper-year students often act as role models for new students. As new students enter an environment they are unfamiliar with, they look to upper-year students to learn the values, norms, and expectations of the institution, and for the types of behaviour that are socially acceptable among the peer group (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012; Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018; Richardson & Tate, 2013). Upper-year students can also often act as a source of empathy, validation and reassurance for new students. The transition to university is not without its challenges, and new students can often feel like they are in it alone. The stories of upper-year students can help new students know that other students have experienced similar challenges, be a source of advice on navigating the challenge, and demonstrate that the challenge is surmountable (Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018; Richardson & Tate, 2013). Finally, the stories that students share can reinforce the knowledge shared elsewhere in the program and help connect new students to programs and services on campus; because the information is coming from a peer, someone who is similar in age, developmental stage, and social group, students are more likely to value it and act upon it (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012; Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018; Richardson & Tate, 2013).

Ongoing Role of the Instructor

While incorporating student voice can be one way to build community and social presence within an online orientation program, considering the role of the instructor can be another way to make students feel that they are a part of a supportive community, and build instructor presence. In many online, asynchronous, self-paced courses, the instructor is simply the invisible hand behind the creation of the course. However, there are a few different ways that an instructor could make themselves more visible. The first is through the promotion of and communications related to the program. Communications written in first-person, directly to the individual student, and signed with the name of a real person, rather than an office or department, can make a student feel more connected to the instructor (Benson et al., 2019). The use of an anchoring figure, a recurring person or narrator who provides continuity throughout the course can also increase instructor presence and create a sense of familiarity and comfort for a student (Benson et al., 2019). This anchoring figure may appear in videos, through quotes with a picture, or in other creative ways. The anchoring figure not only increases instructor presence, but can increase comprehension and retention of information by providing continuity (Benson et al., 2019).

Attrition and Completion

For a student affairs professional, putting together an engaging and effective online orientation program is only one piece of the puzzle. Once the program has been created, the process to get students to complete the program begins. While some institutions may be able to make their programs mandatory, requiring students to complete the program before they can register for courses or receive their student ID, for many institutions, completion of the program will likely be strongly recommended, but entirely voluntary.

Attrition rates for online learning courses are known to be quite high. In for-credit university and college courses, where the incentive to complete is gaining the course credit, online courses have an attrition rate of 25–40%, significantly higher than the attrition rate of 10–20% seen in face-to-face courses (Levy, 2007). Massive open online courses (MOOCs), which are typically taken voluntarily by learners with an interest in the topic, have an attrition rate around 97% (Reich & Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019). Even among verified students in MOOCs, who have paid a fee to take the course, 54% of students never complete the course (Reich & Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019).

These high attrition rates are also seen in many online, self-paced training programs, as well as many online orientation programs. Additionally, these programs often see many of the invited participants never enroll in the program at all. In a study of a self-paced academic integrity course offered at a large university north-west England, only about a third of the students who were given access to the course ever accessed the available resources (Brown et al., 2008). Of the students who did visit the course, the majority did not access all the content available. In an online orientation program offered at a community college in the United States, 39.1% of students completed the program, while a further 24.1% accessed some of the program's content. Finally, in the first year that Western University offered *Leg Up,* an online orientation program for health science students, only 44% of students visited the program, and only 17% of visiting users completed the program. This represented 8% of the invited population. Over the following two years, changes to the program resulted in 42% of visiting users completing the entire program, representing 34% of the invited population. Since the premise of orientation programming is that it is beneficial to all incoming first-year students, these numbers, taken generally, mean that there is still work to be done to capture the remaining two-thirds of students.

Of course, the above discussion about completion rates assumes that the completion of a program is a proper measure of success. In evaluating a self-paced online tutorial in writing (SPOT) offered at Fresno State, Moore et al. (2014) argue that the student who completes portions of the program that they deem relevant, important, or interesting is just as important as the student who completes the entire program; both have been provided with access to educational material and taken away what they felt they needed. In the context of an online orientation program, this argument has some validity in that non-traditional students (i.e., transfer students, mature students, etc.) may find some of the program's content unnecessary based on their previous life experience. However, as most traditional first-year students do not know what to expect at university, it cannot be expected that they would make good decisions about what content they needed and which they could skip. For this reason, while it is important to remember that learners who completed only a portion of the program still gained value, it is also worth exploring ways to increase completion rates and decrease attrition.

Reasons for Attrition in Online Courses

There are a number of reasons why learners do not complete online courses; most of these reasons fall into two separate categories: poor course design and contextual factors surrounding the learner (Long, Dubois, & Faley, 2009). Course design includes factors such as enrollment processes, ease of technology use and course navigation (Long et al., 2009). If learners struggle with accessing the course, getting set up or figuring out how to start and where to go next, they are less likely to finish the course. Additionally, if they regularly encounter technology problems while navigating the course, they have an increased likelihood of giving up. These factors are amplified in learners who were not feeling particularly motivated to begin with, or who experience computer anxiety (Cidral et al., 2018). Course design factors also include the

appropriateness, clarity and presentation of the content, as well as assignments and other assessment techniques (Long et al., 2009). Learners who believe that a course is interesting, useful and important are more likely to be satisfied with the course while enrolled, leading to a higher rate of persistence and completion (Artino, 2008).

Contextual factors that impact online course completion may relate to social support, situational constraints, or personal constraints. In a work-place setting, learners with managers who show an interest in the training are more likely to complete (Long et al., 2009). Managers who show an interest demonstrate that they perceive the training as useful, and thereby influence the learner's perception of the usefulness of the training as well. This influence can also extend to a learner's parents, family, and peers. This indicates that family encouragement or a positive recommendation about the program from a current student or another first-year student can have a positive effect on course completion.

Situational constraints can have a large impact on course completion, with the most common reason given for not completing a course being insufficient time (Brown et al., 2008; Long et al., 2009). Learners may find they do not have enough time because they are busy throughout the entire duration of the program, or because they leave completing the program until it is too late (Brown et al., 2008). Learners may also make their own judgements about the usefulness of the content in a course. They may feel as though they already know the content, so they do not need to complete the course at all, or they pick and choose the content they believe is useful to them, and drop out of the course once they have felt as though they have learned what they needed to know (Brown et al., 2008; O'Connor et al., 2003).

Personal constraints, such as computer anxiety, familiarity with technology and personal motivation all influence course completion as well (Long et al., 2009). As mentioned previously,

learners with computer anxiety or who struggle with technology have an increased likelihood of not completing if they encounter technological difficulties (Cidral et al., 2018). As personal motivation has been found to be the most reported factor leading to course completion, it stands to reason that a lack of motivation would subsequently lead to attrition (O'Connor et al., 2003).

Promoting and Incentivizing the Course

As a first step to getting learners to complete an online orientation program, it is important to ensure that the learner knows that the program exists and can identify one or more reasons why they should complete the program; reasons that will spur them to enroll or access the program initially. Regular promotion of the program is crucial, and any promotional content should clearly convey the purpose and benefits of participation (Eaton et al., 2018; Gayed et al., 2018). Program marketing should be strategically planned and include repeated outreach to students, a variety of outreach strategies (i.e. email, social media, call campaign, in-person promotion, etc.), and variation in the messages contained within each outreach attempt (Eaton et al., 2018; Gayed et al., 2018). At Griffith University, where each faculty had a separate orientation website for their students, the faculties who strategically planned repeated outreach to students to promote the site saw higher numbers of students accessing and engaging with the program than faculties whose outreach was limited (Eaton et al., 2018). The old Roman adage "build it and they will come" does not apply here.

Incentivizing participation and completion can also be an effective strategy to increase course participation and completion (Hanna-Benson, 2019). This often looks like providing a giveaway that a learner will receive upon completing a section of the program or the program in its entirety or offering a learner the chance to win a contest prize based on program completion.

These incentives attract a learner's attention initially, drawing them into the program, and also create a source of extrinsic motivation.

There are a few factors to consider when implementing an incentive. First, the incentive must align with the amount of work required (Keller, 2008). Offering students a chance to win a $10 gift card in exchange for spending four hours completing a program, for example, will likely not be effective as an incentive for most students. While there are no set standards that govern exactly what this means, it is important that students do not feel belittled by the incentive being offered. Incentives of higher value are often more successful than similar incentives of lower value (i.e., a $500 gift card as opposed to a $100 gift card). The second consideration requires a reflection on what the learner may value most as an incentive. A 2019 study of Western University's *Leg Up* online orientation program found that switching the incentive from a chance to win a $250 gift card to an automatic two-percent grade increase in a specific first-year course increased the percentage of invited participants who completed the program from 8% to 34% (Hanna-Benson, 2019). Notably, while offering a direct grade increase works as an incentive, promising learners better grades due to knowledge and skills gained by completing the program does not have the same impact (Brown et al., 2008). The final consideration when implementing an incentive is to ensure that the incentive does not have a detrimental effect on intrinsic motivation. The negative impact that grades, rewards, and recognition can have on intrinsic motivation has been widely studied in education, and it is important to ensure that messaging about the benefits of the program does not get lost amidst the promotion of any incentives (Artino, 2008).

While promoting and incentivizing the course are both helpful in getting students to complete, personalized reminder emails also have an important role to play in getting learners

across the finish line to completion (Gayed et al., 2018). Designing these emails based on Keller's ARCS theory of motivation can improve their effectiveness at eliciting the desired behaviour (Kim & Keller, 2008). This means considering the reasons why a learner may not have completed the program, and analyzing their motivational requirements, and then designing strategies that pertain specifically to the identified needs and requirements. In particular, this may mean: addressing the email to the individual student, capturing their attention and curiosity and leading them to believe that the message is specifically for them (attention); including information related directly to that particular learner, such as listing the specific parts of the program they have not yet completed, or referring to responses given in the program (relevance); and/or encouraging learners to believe that they can achieve the goal of finishing the course (i.e. by breaking down the time requirement into chunks that seem reasonable to a busy learner) or a different goal, with the help of the program in question (Kim & Keller, 2008).

Building Motivation into the Course

As previously mentioned, a lack of motivation is one of the most common reasons why a learner does not complete a course (O'Connor et al., 2003). In an online orientation program, there typically is no clear motivator for completing the course. Unlike an academic course, the work a learner puts into the course does not result in a grade or an academic credit; it simply helps set them up for success. An online orientation must, therefore, be well-designed and engaging in order to motivate a learner to complete the course once they have begun. Following the design principles outlined in this literature review thus far will help, but it can also be helpful to evaluate the course through the lens of motivation.

While Keller's (1987) ARCS theory of motivation was not designed explicitly for online learning, but for instructional materials more broadly, it can still be useful in the design of an

online orientation program. This theory defines four major conditions that have to be met for a learner to become and remain motivated: attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction (Keller, 1987).

Attention. Attention asks the instructor to consider how they can both capture and sustain attention throughout the learning activity or course. This can be done by creating conflict that the learner will then desire to resolve, using concrete examples and visual representations of content, varying the format and medium of instruction, using humour, and creating activities in which the learner must actively participate, such as games, role plays, and simulations (Keller, 1987, 2008).

Relevance. Relevance involves ensuring the course and learning activities seem relevant to the learner, both in the present moment, and in relation to future career opportunities. Learners should understand how what they are learning builds on previous skills, how it connects to their current needs, and be given choice in the activities they wish to engage in, or how they engage in those activities (Keller, 1987, 2008). Having current students, alumni, or even professors share their stories within the course can also help to demonstrate the relevance of content within an online orientation program.

Confidence. A learner needs to feel as though some level of success is possible if they are going to invest their time in a learning activity or course (Keller, 1987, 2008). An instructor can help build the confidence of a learner by clearly stating learning goals and criteria for evaluation and being clear about how long it will likely take a learner to be successful in meeting the learning goal. A course should be structured so that material is delivered in order of increasing difficulty, and the learner should be given the opportunity to practice a new skill under low-risk conditions before being asked to demonstrate the skill in a realistic setting or on a est (Keller, 1987).

Satisfaction. Every effort should be made to make learners feel good about their accomplishments throughout the learning process (Keller, 1987, 2008). Learners should be informally tested often, so that they can be given feedback on their learning. Feedback should be informative, helpful, motivating, and given frequently at the beginning of a learning experience. Instructors should also incorporate unexpected rewards and experiences into their course in order to surprise and delight their students, providing a source of extrinsic motivation (Keller, 1987).

The ultimate goal of incorporating Keller's ARCS theory of motivation into the design of an online orientation program is to prevent a learner from getting bored or questioning why they are completing the program while in the midst of doing so. A learner who is engaged throughout the entire process of completing the course is much more likely to get to the end than a learner who constantly has to be putting effort and energy into continuing.

Conclusion

As orientation programming continues to change and evolve to meet student needs and support an institution's mission and retention goals, online orientation programs are becoming increasingly common. Using the community of inquiry model and considering cognitive presence, instructor presence, and social presence when designing or updating an online orientation program can help a student affairs professional to ensure they are thinking about the project comprehensively. The model helps practitioners to think through the best type of learning activities, the set-up and design of the course system, how to support a student throughout the course, how to incorporate student voice, and how to use the program to incorporate students into the existing campus community. Combining the community of inquiry model with the more practical orientation and online learning practices outlined in this literature review can help ensure an online orientation program creates an effective and engaging experience for students.

Chapter 3: Taking Orientation Online

Rationale for Project

As more institutions are implementing online orientation programs to help welcome new students to their community and help them succeed, an increasing number of student affairs practitioners are being asked to design, update, and oversee these programs. For many student affairs practitioners, this will be the first time they have had to take on any sort of online project or program, and they may not yet have the required skills and knowledge. This project was created to help bridge that gap.

To help other student affairs practitioners create effective and engaging online orientation programs, I created a comprehensive guide in the form of a website, *Taking Orientation Online,* at www.onlineOTR.ca. The website has two major sections: *Explore our program* and *Build your program*. The *Explore our program* section replicates the content of UVic's online Pre-Arrival Program in a format that is accessible to folks not affiliated with UVic and allows visitors to view the principles and practices of an effective and engaging online orientation program in action. The *Build your program* section of the website consists of a series of blog posts that collectively create a blueprint for a student affairs professional creating an online orientation program.

I knew from the beginning of this project that my goal was to create a comprehensive guide about how to create an online orientation program for first-year university/college students. While I potentially could have created this resource as an e-book, a podcast, or a video series, I chose to create this guide in the form of a website for several reasons. One of the major factors was that creating a website allowed me to be able to replicate UVic's Pre-Arrival Program as part of the project, and to create a replica that was as similar as possible to the

version that lives in the LMS. Over the past few years, as I have talked to other practitioners about my program and shared the program at conferences, one of the most common questions I have received is, “Is it possible to have access to the program?” As access to the program currently requires a UVic netlink ID to login, the answer has always been no, and I wanted to be able to provide an alternative. The second factor I considered when deciding the format for the guide was the needs and behaviour of the student affairs professionals who were my target audience. While the project is intended to be a comprehensive guide that will walk a practitioner through everything they need to think about while creating an online orientation program, I am also aware that many practitioners may only be looking for information about a specific aspect of creating a program. Additionally, student affairs practitioners are often very busy, and more likely to skim through a resource looking for things that stand out to them, rather than curl up and take in every word of a guide from beginning to end. I wanted to create the guide in a format that would still be helpful for those folks, and I felt as though a website offered the possibility to do that.

Overview of website

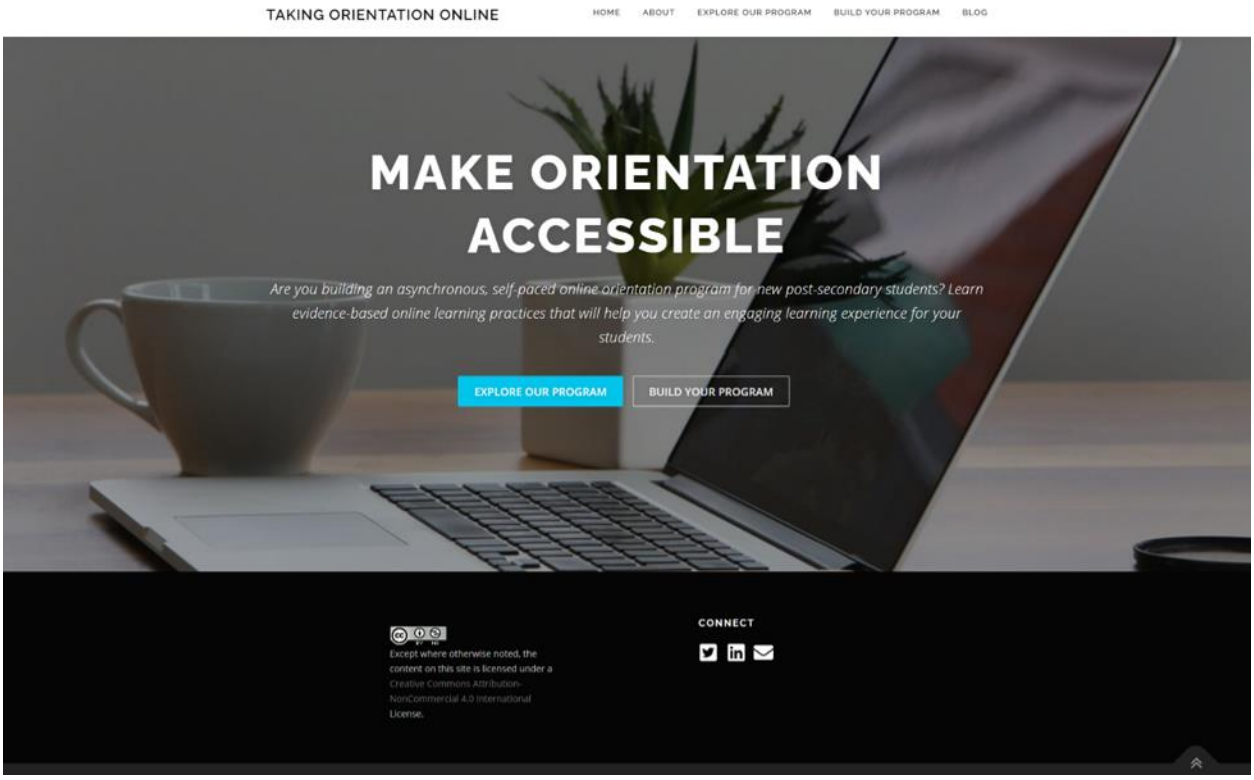
Home Page

The home page of *Taking Orientation Online* introduces the purpose of the website and points visitors to the major two sections of the site: *Explore our program* and *Build your program* (Figure 2). The major headline highlights that the site will help visitors make orientation, online, accessible, and convenient, and the sub-heading further explains that the site provides “evidence-based online learning practices that will help you create an engaging learning experience for your students.” The sub-heading also clarifies that the site is focused on online,

asynchronous, self-paced orientation programs. Two large buttons on the home page link visitors to the *Explore our program* and *Build your program* sections of the website.

Figure 2

Screenshot of the Home page of Taking Orientation Online

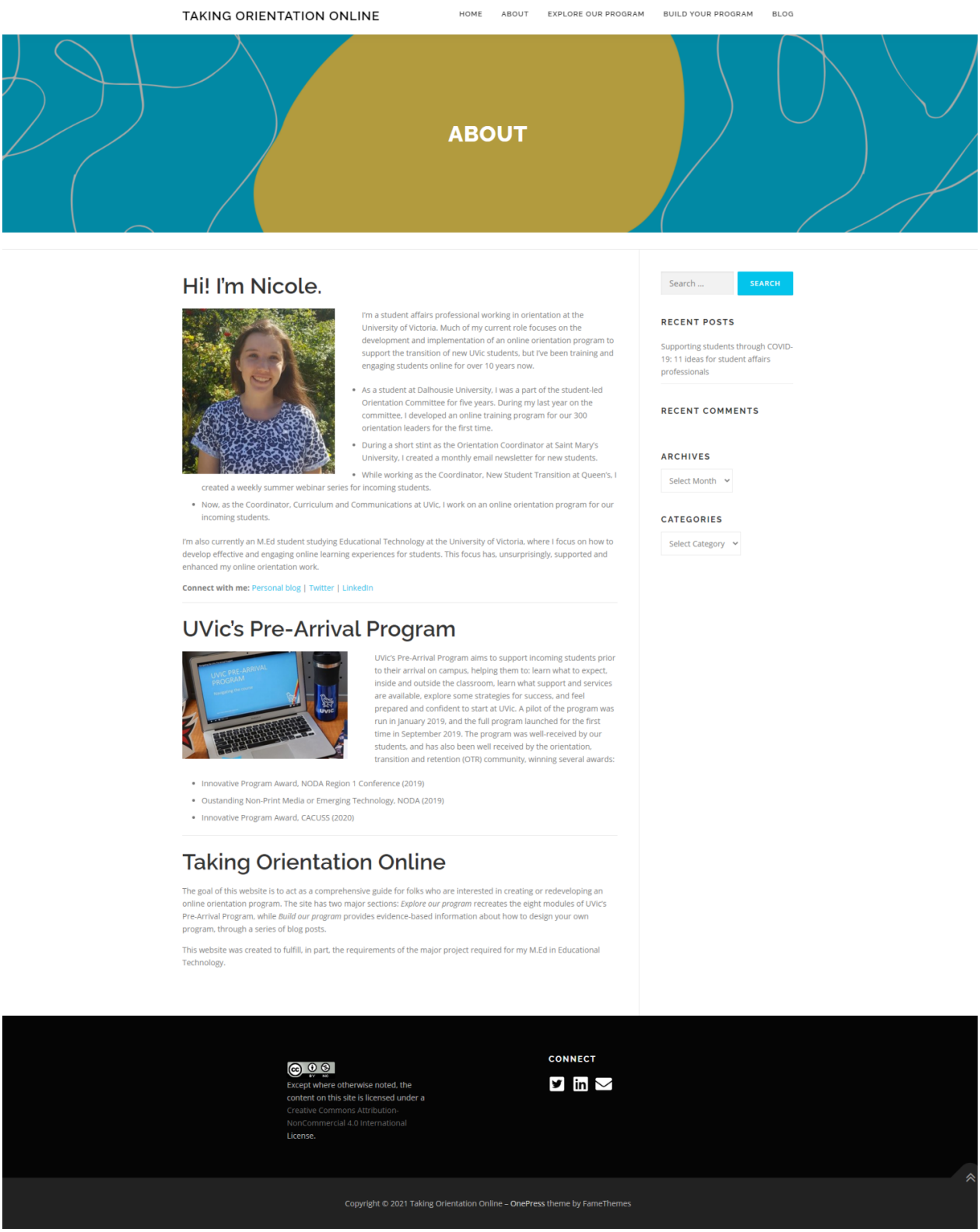


About

The *About* page (Figure 3), accessible via the main menu, provides further information on the purpose of the website, including explaining that the site was created to fulfill, in part, the requirements of my M.Ed in Educational Technology. The *About* page also introduces me and my background in an effort to add credibility to the site and introduces UVic's Pre-Arrival Program.

Figure 3

Screenshot of the About Page



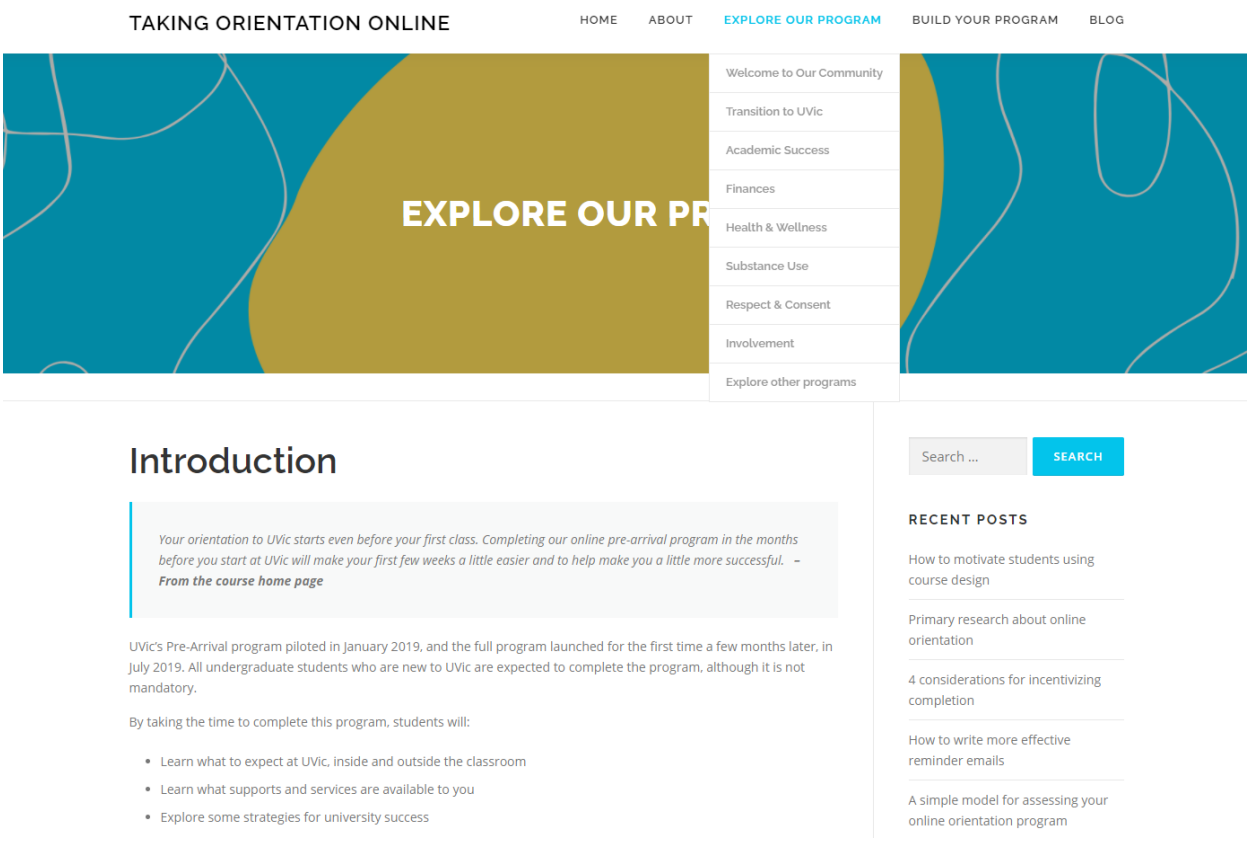
Explore Our Program

The *Explore our program* section of the website (Figure 4) provides visitors with the opportunity to explore the content and activities that make up UVic's Pre-Arrival Program. While the student version of the program is hosted in Brightspace, UVic's LMS, all content has been replicated on *Taking Orientation Online* to provide visitors with an opportunity to see the principles and best practices outlined in this project in action. It has previously been impossible to share the program with colleagues at other institutions, as a netlink ID is required to be able to access Brightspace, and only UVic students, staff and faculty are able to get a netlink ID.

Within the *Explore our program* section of the site, I have created a different page for each module of the program, which outlines the learning outcomes for the module, the activities that make up that module, and our rationale and approach for the subject. Each module page also links to pages containing the full text of activities, any videos that were included, and any interactive activities that were created using Articulate Storyline. While not every activity was able to be replicated exactly, as some activities used the quiz or survey functions in Brightspace, every activity has been, at minimum, fully explained. The *Explore your program* section also includes blog posts written by practitioners at other Canadian institutions, which provide an overview of the programs that they have created.

Figure 4

Screenshot of the Main Page of the 'Explore our Program' Section

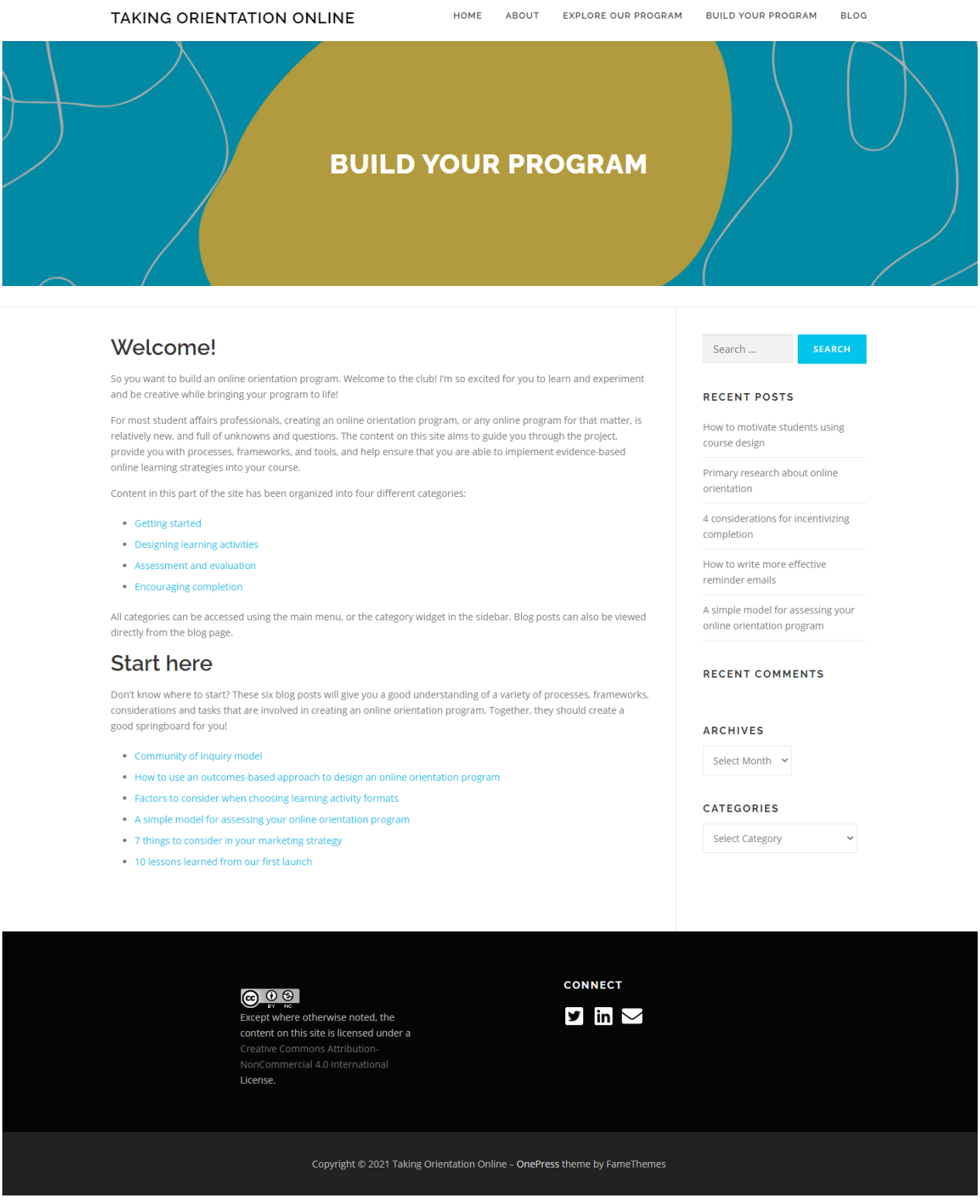


Build Your Program

The *Build your program* section of the website (Appendix 1) consists of a series of blog posts that collectively create a comprehensive, evidence-based guide to creating an engaging and effective online orientation program. The main *Build your program* page (Figure 5) offers a "start here" guide for the site, linking to the foundational posts on a number of different topics. The drop-down menu in this section of the site allows visitors to view all posts grouped in four different categories: Getting started, designing learning activities, assessment and evaluation, and encouraging completion.

Figure 5

Screenshot of the Main Page of the 'Build your Program' Section

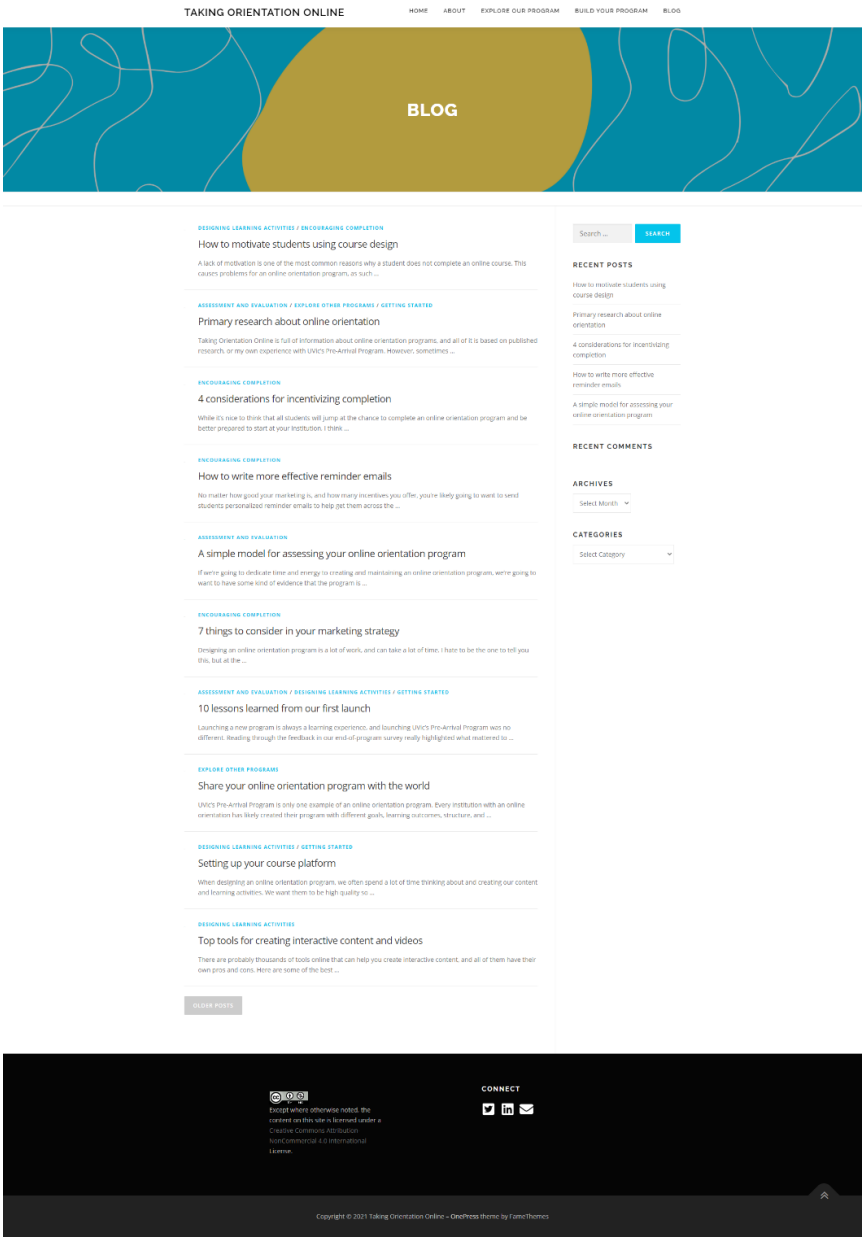


Blog

The *Blog* section of the website (Figure 6) presents an updated feed of all the blog posts written on the site in reverse chronological order. These are the same blog posts that can be found categorized in the *Build your program* section of the website.

Figure 6

Screenshot of the Blog Feed



Chapter 4: Reflections

Summary of Learning

In many ways, I created UVic's online orientation program and completed my master's program in the wrong order. In a perfect world, I would have started my master's degree, dived into the research about online learning, and then applied everything I learned while creating the program. In reality, I launched the program the day before we started classes. This in itself made the learning throughout the M.Ed an interesting experience, as I was able to apply concepts retroactively to explain the work we had done, the decisions we had made, and the processes we used. I was lucky to work closely with UVic's Technology Integrated Learning (TIL) department throughout the development of the Pre-Arrival Program and adopted many of their processes and approaches along the way. Topics studied throughout our M.Ed, and researched as part of this project in particular, frequently resonated with aspects of our work. Reading about the roles of an online educator, I was able to think through who on our small team had filled that role for the Pre-Arrival project, and more critically assess the crucial role that each person or department had played. Learning about the ADDIE model of instructional design led me to realize that was exactly the process we had used to create the Pre-Arrival Program; our project plans matched those five steps exactly. Discovering Kirkpatrick's four levels of evaluation has helped me better articulate and explain our assessment decisions; surprisingly, aspects of Kirkpatrick's model have also helped me better understand why the specific questions that we chose to ask in our design brainstorming sessions were so effective at getting to our desired result. These are only a few examples of how I retroactively applied what I was learning to our program, but the reality is these examples could fill page after page.

I am grateful that much of what I have learned, through the M.Ed program courses and through my research, has supported the decisions we made and approaches we took with the Pre-Arrival Program. However, there are also things that I have started to question or am beginning to rethink. Reading about the pre-post test assessment strategies of other online orientation programs has made me wonder if we should be re-evaluating the questions that we are asking, and whether we should potentially consider using a more validated question set. Learning about motivation and incentive strategies, and particularly the story of Western University's *Leg Up* online orientation program, where a shift from a monetary prize to bonus points on their grade led to an increase in completion rates, has resulted in the initiation of a process to review our incentive strategy. Perhaps most influentially, Marineo and Shi's (2019) study of an online library instruction module really drove home the idea that if you identify the factors that influence student success the most, and then identify how you can influence those factors through your program, you are most likely to have a meaningful impact on the student experience. That was a paper I read in our first summer term and is a concept that I still think about regularly as we make decisions about programming and content.

Concepts we have learned throughout the M.Ed program have shown up in my work in various ways all over the place, but perhaps none more so than the concept of openness. The Pre-Arrival Program is a great example of the opposite of openness. The program is hosted within UVic's LMS, meaning only folks with a UVic netlink ID are able to access the program. Even further, because we did not want to skew our assessment data, staff and faculty are asked not to enroll in the program, even though they could benefit from viewing the content that students are accessing. While we have solved the issue of staff and faculty wanting to access the program by creating a separate community course that they are welcome to self-enroll in, there really is no

good solution for allowing folks outside the UVic community to view the program. Over the past two years, I have talked incessantly about UVic's Pre-Arrival Program to any student affairs professional who will listen, presenting at conferences, sharing lessons learned and major successes via social media, and meeting one-on-one with colleagues. Almost without fail, I am asked if they can look at the program, and the answer has always unfortunately been no, as it simply has not been logistically possible. The benefits of openness become extremely apparent when you are restricted from being open through no choice of your own.

In many ways, the lack of open educational resources within the field of student affairs is likely holding back our collective work. Instead of being able to share our work, learn from each other, borrow things from other institutions and improve upon them, we are often stuck beginning again from scratch. We may be reinventing the wheel, or even just borrowing an idea that we heard about, but still recreating all the resources required to bring the idea to life. Creating open resources, along with facilitating ways to share and find those resources, would allow us all to reuse materials, revamp them for our specific institutional context, and ultimately, allow us to save time and energy that could then be devoted to other projects. The fact that the lack of use of open educational resources in our field might be holding us back was particularly brought to light throughout several conversations I had partway through the M.Ed program with a colleague on the East Coast. Their institution was looking to implement an online sexualized violence prevention program and had reached out to inquire about the sexualized violence content in our Pre-Arrival Program. More specifically, they were wondering about the possibility of being able to use our content themselves. Ultimately, it was decided that they would need to create their own materials, as ours were heavily based on UVic's sexualized violence policy and approach to sexualized violence prevention, and not easily editable. The whole experience really

drove home how difficult and complicated it is to share materials and resources between institutions, and how much stronger our national approach to sexualized violence prevention could be if we were all working together instead of separately.

While much of this summary of learning has focused on learning in relation to my work with the Pre-Arrival Program (which is, admittedly, the majority of my work), it is worth mentioning that examples of what we have learned in the courses throughout this program have shown up everywhere. After we found out that all students would be online learners in fall 2020 due to COVID-19, I was asked to give a presentation about "understanding the online learner" as part of UVic's biannual student affairs professional development day. I used the community of inquiry model as a framework for much of the presentation, as I walked my colleagues through how and what they should think about as they adapt their services to both a virtual offering, and to online students. While discussing and exploring conceptions of curriculum during our summer 2020 course, I was simultaneously participating in a webinar series about developing an integrated student affairs curriculum, and able to bring concepts from one to the other, and back again. Even on a much smaller level, concepts have shown up in interesting ways; shortly after we learned about copyright, attribution, and licensing, I received an email asking if I knew anything about the origins of a specific social media post, as UVic's legal department had been contacted by the owner of the photo, which had been used without permission or attribution.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

As institution's increasingly add online orientation programs to their suite of orientation and transition programs, it is important that we simultaneously prioritize conducting research related to these interventions. Currently, there is very little research relating to online orientation programs. Much of the research that does exist focuses on online orientation programs for online

learners; of all the articles that I read throughout this project, only two or three were about online orientation programs that were intended for students attending classes in-person. While online learners are certainly an important demographic, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the reality is that for most student affairs practitioners, the majority of our time and efforts are focused on supporting students who are on campus. If we want to ensure we are making the best use of our time and resources, we need to make sure that the programs we are providing students are evidence-based, up-to-date, and meeting the needs of our students.

There is a lot to learn from the broader literature about online learning that can be applied to an online orientation program, and much of this project has focused on that application. However, throughout this project it has become increasingly obvious that an online orientation program is a very specific type of online learning. There are vast differences between what works in a for-credit online course, and what works in a voluntary, asynchronous, self-paced online orientation, and this is underexplored in the literature. A major focus of much of the online learning literature relates to building community. It discusses the idea of instructor presence, facilitating dialogue, collaboration between students, etc. All of these elements, which can greatly enhance an online course, are essentially non-existent in an asynchronous, self-paced online orientation program. Yet, these continue to be core components in most online learning frameworks, and no corresponding frameworks seem to exist that fit more closely with the realities of an online orientation program. The community of inquiry model highlights social presence in a way that does not quite work in an online orientation. In the 7 C's of learning design framework (Conole, 2018), two of the 'C's' are communication and collaboration; again, these are two steps that do not quite work in an online orientation. Re-envisioning some of these

frameworks to create a model that would be useful for asynchronous, self-paced training programs could be beneficial.

Another area where the existing online learning research does not completely align with the realities of an online orientation program is the consideration of motivational factors. For for-credit online courses, students can be motivated by the grade that is attached to course completion, or the fact that completing the course gets them one credit closer to graduation. For many online training programs, employees are required to complete the program, so compliance becomes the motivator. Even for MOOCs, which are well-known to have extremely low completion rates, the student actively chose to enroll in the course of their own volition, so there is an inherent level of motivation. Assuming that completion of the online orientation program is not mandatory, none of those motivational factors are present. There is no tangible 'carrot' to completion, no extrinsic motivator. While much of the research about attrition in online courses and training programs also applies to an online orientation, a deeper look at motivational factors for online orientation programs specifically could help us all increase our completion rates, and better support a larger number of students.

While additional research related to online orientation programs is needed, it is also critical that the field of student affairs, more broadly, consider how to disseminate the research being done on important topics. Student affairs, particularly in Canada, is largely a field of practitioners. We are not immersed in academia every day, and we do not have endless hours to spend searching for literature on a regular basis. Currently, there are very few journals directly related to topics in our context, and very few defined methods for getting new research in front of practitioners. As the literature review for this project demonstrated, research about online orientation can be found in a wide-ranging array of different journals, some focused on

computing in education, others focused on topics as specific as geography in higher education, others focused on orientation. Streamlining the dissemination of research and finding and offering ways of sharing research findings that go beyond an academic paper or once-a-year conference presentation could help student affairs practitioners access the research findings more readily. Being involved with a network of graduate students within student affairs over the past two years has highlighted how much research and exploration is happening behind closed doors and without being daylighted.

Reflections on Growth

In many ways, the purpose of schooling and an education is to gain knowledge and leave knowing more than when you started. While I certainly do know much more about education and educational technology now than when I started the M.Ed program two years ago, I would not say that knowledge is the most valuable thing I have gained from this program. While I am leaving with a list of concepts that I could now explain or answer correctly on a test, and while I am now more familiar with the foundation concepts of the field in which I work, the more important thing is that I have changed throughout the course of completing this degree. The ways I think, what I am thinking about, and how I think about my field and my work have shifted subtly with every course, every blog post, and every conversation.

One of the major impacts of this master's degree has been how it has highlighted the benefits of reading and keeping up with the research. Particularly in education, research can sometimes feel like it presents obvious conclusions, making its usefulness feel questionable. However, through reading hundreds of research papers over the last two years, I have realized that research can help you see things through a different lens, make connections, and think differently about topics, even if the conclusion is not exactly novel. I have discovered that

academic papers all contribute to a larger conversation, and it is a conversation that I want to be a part of.

Completing my master's degree has also taught me a lot about how I learn and work. I have begun to accept that writing will never be a quick and easy process for me, because writing is how I process information and figure out what I think and feel. It is a process of constant revision, as what I think may change from one paragraph to the next. I have also realized that it is a process that requires constant breaks, and to allow that without guilt. There are so many times that we wish we were different, that we could work differently, but after two years of trying to make changes, I have started to accept that I cannot change my core work habits, and I need to accommodate for them instead.

According to Gallup's *StrengthsFinder* assessment (a student affairs favourite), three of my top five strengths are learner, input, and intellection. All three of these strengths were put to use every day throughout the M.Ed program; the program has been a constant chance to learn, explore, share and discuss ideas and concepts that I find fascinating. It has been a constant reminder of how much I love being immersed in an academic world, and a nudge to figure out how to incorporate that into my post-master's life. Completing this program has been a ton of work, late nights, stress, and anxiety, especially as COVID-19 changed all of our lives, but I would not change it for the world.

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Appendix 1: Content of Taking Orientation Online

This appendix contains a full export of all content available in the *Build your program* section of *Taking Orientation Online* as of April 2021. It is highly recommended that the reader visit www.onlineOTR.ca to view the most up-to-date version of the website.

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PART I

BUILD YOUR PROGRAM

Welcome!

So you want to build an online orientation program. Welcome to the club! I'm so excited for you to learn and experiment and be creative while bringing your program to life! For most student affairs professionals, creating an online orientation program, or any online program for that matter, is relatively new, and full of unknowns and questions. The content on this site aims to guide you through the project, provide you with processes, frameworks, and tools, and help ensure that you are able to implement evidence-based online learning strategies into your course. Content in this part of the site has been organized into four different categories:

- Getting started
- Designing learning activities
- Assessment and evaluation
- Encouraging completion

All categories can be accessed using the main menu, or the category widget in the sidebar. Blog posts can also be viewed directly from the blog page.

Start here

Don't know where to start? These six blog posts will give you a good understanding of a variety of processes, frameworks,

considerations and tasks that are involved in creating an online orientation program. Together, they should create a good springboard for you!

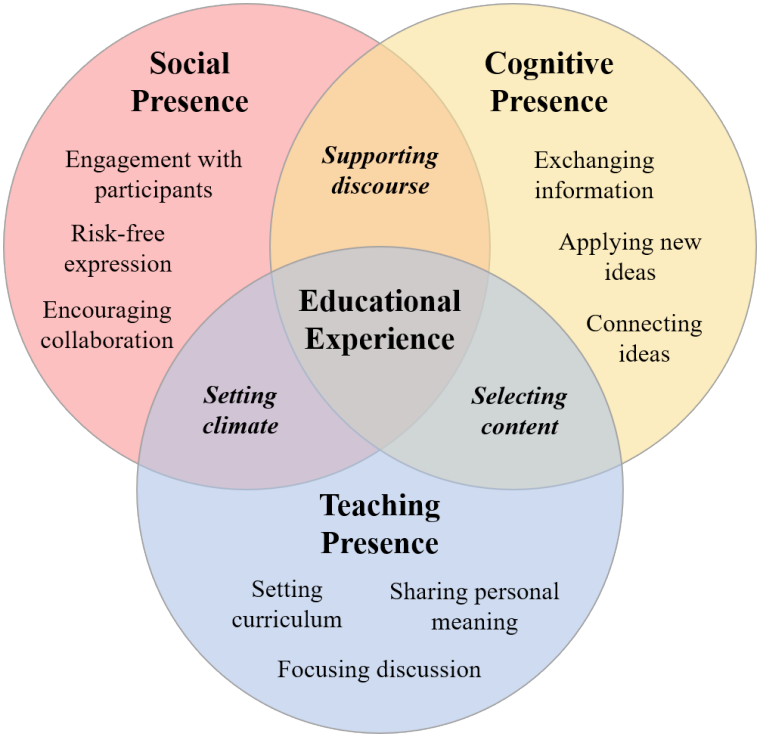
- Community of inquiry model
- How to use an outcomes-based approach to design an online orientation program
- Factors to consider when choosing learning activity formats
- A simple model for assessing your online orientation program
- 7 things to consider in your marketing strategy
- 10 lessons learned from our first launch

Community of inquiry model

I never thought I would be the kind of person who liked a framework or theory. In fact, as much as I've tried to incorporate theory into my work, in general, I've found that it's used at the beginning of a new project (or at least stated in initial project documents), and then forgotten about once the project is underway.

But then I read about the Community of Inquiry model, and now I'm admittedly a little bit obsessed.

The Community of Inquiry model



The Community of Inquiry model (adapted from a graphic by the Model eLearning team at Spring Arbour University)

The Community of Inquiry model is a popular conceptual framework in online education that identifies three main important factors in a quality online learning experience: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. While the model is most commonly used in the design of higher education courses, with a few tweaks and adaptations, it can easily be applied to an online, self-paced, asynchronous online orientation program. I love this model because it helps you think holistically about the development of the program and all of the choices that must be made. Often, we focus on the content of the program, and prioritize that over everything else. Thinking about your program through the lens of the community of inquiry model forces you to think not only about content, but also about learning activities, structure and navigation, social interaction and community building, and more. And these are all things that can impact the quality of your program.

Let's dive into the model and see how it can help you.

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence is "the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing... learning outcomes" (Joo et al., 2011, p. 1655). Essentially, this presence encompasses the role of the instructor in designing and managing the course. In an in-person environment, teaching presence is somewhat obvious; the instructor is quite literally there, is present, in front of you much of the time, and you are able to directly witness the impact that they and their choices are having on the learning environment. In an online program, especially in an asynchronous, self-paced course, teaching presence can be a bit more subtle, but is equally important. The instructor themselves

may not be visible, but they are present in every decision made related to designing and managing the course.

In an online orientation program, teaching presence is essentially the invisible hand guiding students through the course, and includes components such as the design and organization of the course platform, the creation of learning activities, and communication with learners. To ensure a learner can successfully navigate a course and remain focused on the learning content, it is important that time and attention are dedicated to concepts including usability, user-interface design, help and support, and visual design/aesthetics.

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence is the "exploration, construction, resolution and confirmation of understanding" (Joo et al., 2011, p. 1655). Essentially, cognitive presence is the intellectual and mental effort and processes required for learning. In an in-person course, or even a synchronous course, cognitive presence may be created through collaborative activities or group discussions and reflections. In an online orientation program, cognitive presence is largely created through the design and delivery of content and learning activities.

There are many different types of activities that can be used in an online orientation program, and each will elicit a different level of cognitive presence from the learner. Activities which simply require a learner to read text will likely not elicit high cognitive presence, as the learner has no incentive to read closely, or will likely not be using strategies that will help them retain the content of the text. Activities that require a learner to interact with the content, whether it be playing a Jeopardy-style game, answering questions related to a scenario, or reflecting on content and applying it to their own life will likely elicit a higher cognitive presence.

Social Presence

Social presence is "the ability of participants to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 32). Social presence allows learners to feel comfortable being themselves and share their thoughts, feelings and experiences with their peers, and shifts online learning away from being a simply process of downloading information towards an experience that creates a real feeling of community.

In many online courses, social presence might be created through a learner's interactions with their peers, and the community standards that guide those interactions. In a self-paced course, however, creating social presence in this way might be difficult. If all learners aren't participating in the course at the same time, it's impossible for them to interact with each other. With online orientation programs, the goal may need to shift from creating a community within the course, toward welcoming students to a community within the institution. Instead of putting the focus on structuring a course so that learners are comfortable being themselves, the focus should be on introducing the institution in a way that allows learners to feel as though they are a part of the larger community, and see a place for themselves, their true self, in that community.

Applying the CoI model

A few questions to think about:

- Is the path through the course obvious? Does it feel like there is an invisible hand guiding you, or does it feel like a struggle to figure out what's next?
- Are instructions for how to complete the course and all

activities clear and easy to follow?
- Is help and support available? Do students know how to access that help, and will they get a prompt response?
- Do the activities in the course require a student to think, apply, make connections, and reflect?
- Are students required to actively participate in order to complete activities, or passively consume content?
- Does the course as a whole demonstrate the institution's values?
- Are there opportunities for the student to see themselves at the institution throughout the course?

References and resources

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7 benefits (and 3 challenges) of online orientation

In 2020, many institutions introduced an online orientation program for health and safety reasons, as a response to COVID-19. While that was necessary while health restrictions kept us from gathering in-person, there are many reasons why an online orientation program can be beneficial for your students, and why you should consider keeping your program for years to come!

Benefits of an online orientation program

1. It can be more convenient for a student

Online orientation programs can generally be completed whenever and wherever a student wishes. They remove the requirement to be in a designated place at a designated time, which means access is no longer restricted by geographic area, scheduling conflicts, availability, or financial means.

2. It can function as an ongoing resource, not just an event

With an in-person program, students are largely expected to retain all the information that is delivered throughout the day. However, we all know they often don't, and they then need to rediscover this information for themselves at a later date (if ever). With an

online orientation program, students are able to revisit content whenever they need a refresher. Since the same place they saw the information originally exists, they are able to easily find the information again.

3. It's an opportunity to create a more student-centred experience

As much as we try to make an in-person orientation experience learner-centred, there are a lot of limitations, including time, number of people, and delivery format. An online orientation program is often able to be a much more learner-centred experience than an in-person program can be. Learners can choose exactly when they want to engage in the learning opportunity, can work at their own pace, and (assuming the program is not mandatory), can skip sections of the program they feel will not be helpful.

4. It's less expensive over time

While there may be a large initial investment required to get an online orientation program up and running, an online orientation can be less expensive over time than a comparable in-person program. The staff time and resources to update and run an online orientation program every year is generally less than that needed to plan and run in-person programming, and recurring costs associated with hiring session facilitators and orientation leaders, booking space on campus, and hiring a caterer are no longer needed, or at minimum, greatly reduced. Finally, an online orientation program can be used many different times, for different student intakes, without requiring many changes.

5. You can easily tailor it to specific populations

Most online orientation systems, whether you've contracted an outside company or are using your institution's learning management system, allow you to choose which content is shown to who, based on demographic information within the system. This means you could choose to show or hide specific modules for a specific audience (i.e. show international students a module about immigration that domestic students won't see, or show transfer students a different academic advising module than a first-year student is shown), without the requirement of creating an entirely different program.

6. You can include a variety of different learning activities

With many in-person orientation programs, there is a large number of students attending all at once. This can make it difficult to create impactful learning activities, interact with students on an individual level, or provide feedback. Large in-person programs often end up being full of talking heads, simply due to the number of students they are trying to program for. Online orientation programs provide an opportunity to include a variety of different learning activities that allow students to interact with the content and receive immediate feedback on their learning.

7. It frees up staff to actually respond to student needs

During an in-person program, how much time do you actually spend

talking to students, answering their questions, and responding to their needs? For me, the answer has always been very little; I was always spending most of my time dealing with program logistics, welcoming speakers, and ensuring students were in the right place at the right time. Because most of the work involved in running an online orientation program happens prior to a program even launching, orientation staff are then available to better respond to student needs and requests while the program is happening.

Challenges and drawbacks

Overall, an online orientation program offers convenience, for both you and your students, and can increase accessibility. It's not all fun and games though; there are some challenges and drawbacks.

1. It requires a different skillset

While running an in-person program requires that you deal with scheduling, logistics, and often volunteer management, designing an online orientation program requires that you be familiar with technology, instructional design, and online learning. Even if you're working with IT, a learning designer, or an outside software company, you'll likely need to have some knowledge of the software platform, the technology involved in creating audio, graphics, video, screencasting, and more, and of digital accessibility.

2. There's less opportunity for peer connection

While this could potentially vary depending on how you create

your program, in general, there is less opportunity for peer-to-peer connection in an online program than an in-person program. Online orientation programs rarely help students make connections with other students, and they do not often help connect students directly with university staff for assistance and answers to questions.

3. It requires a high level of commitment, motivation and planning

To participate in an in-person program, you don't need a whole lot of commitment or motivation. You simply register, put it on your calendar, and show up. Once you're there, it doesn't typically require a lot of effort to go through the program. An online orientation is a little different. Because you can schedule it whenever you want, you can also consistently procrastinate. If you get bored halfway through, you can walk away. It's easy to get distracted by other things on the internet while trying to complete the program. In order to make it to the end, you need to have the commitment and motivation to do so.

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The 9 roles of an online educator

Creating an online orientation program is not a small undertaking. There are a lot of tasks to be done, a lot of decisions to be made, and a lot of roles to be played. Going into a new project, it's important to understand the breadth of responsibilities and have a clear understanding of who will be filling each role. While many of these roles, when viewed by title alone, are similar to roles involved in other types of face-to-face programs, the responsibilities and tasks associated with these roles for an online project may be different.

The Managerial Role

The managerial role acts as the project manager, and kicks the project off by setting objectives, timelines, budget, and decision

making norms. They ensure the project is moving along according to the timeline, assist with removing any roadblocks that occur, and ensure folks around the institutions and in senior leadership are kept aware of the status of the project. The managerial role may also deal with tasks related to learner registration, security, privacy and record-keeping to ensure that your practices align with institutional policies.

Who: As the project lead, you may be responsible for certain parts of the managerial role, while your manager may take responsibility for other parts.

Skills and knowledge: Project management, communication, budgeting

The Pedagogical Role

The pedagogical role relates to the interactive pedagogies used in the program and the cognitive support given to the student. This role helps to determine which strategies and approaches will help to facilitate the learners understanding of the course content. They help to determine whether learning activities will be didactic, experiential, scenario-based, discussion based, reflective, etc., based on the desired outcome. This role is very similar to the pedagogical role involved in planning face-to-face programming.

Who: The pedagogical role is typically held by the project lead, but may be influenced by the content expert role and the instructional design role.

Skills and knowledge: Pedagogy, instructional strategies, science of learning

The Social Role

The social role involves ensuring that any interactions that the student has with the institution in the process of completing the program are friendly, supportive, and helpful. This includes emails received about the program, responses to discussion posts within the program, or responses to emails from students who are having difficulty. For a self-paced, asynchronous online orientation program, this role may be small, but it can still be important.

Who: The social role may be played by a number of different people, including department communications officers, who may be responsible for sending emails, IT or Help Desk folks who may respond to student problems, and student staff, who may be hired to interact with students within the program.

Skills and knowledge: Friendliness and patience!

The Technical Role

An online orientation program obviously requires using technology; your project team, therefore, requires folks who are technology experts, and can support both you and your students. They can provide resources and instruction to help you and your students feel comfortable using any required systems and software, suggest appropriate technology tools to help you meet your goals, and help solve any issues that arise.

Who: The technical role is often filled by folks who work in IT or in University Systems. It may be filled by a specific person, there may be one person who supports you, and a different person who supports your students, or the role may be filled not by a specific individual, but by existing systems and practices at your institution. For example, we don't have a specific person who supports students with issues they encounter with the program, but UVic's Help Desk

is always an email or phone call away! The technical role is very rarely held by the project lead.

Skills and knowledge: Information technology, university systems, software used within the program, communication

The Assessor Role

The assessor role includes both the assessment and feedback that is given to students throughout the program. In an online orientation program, most of this assessment is embedded within the program's learning activities as feedback that appears automatically depending on what the student selects, or as quizzes that are automatically graded. This role also monitors students' progress and performance in the program.

Who: While it's possible that many people will weigh in on program assessment, including your manager, project partners, or an assessment specialist on campus, it's likely that you, as project lead, will be responsible for assessment.

Skills and knowledge: Different assessment techniques, survey and/or quiz design, providing feedback

The Content Expert Role

The content expert(s) play a critical role in the development of an online orientation program. While most orientation professionals are well-versed in the needs of first-year students and effective methods for engaging these students, they are often not the experts on all the topics an online orientation program may attempt to address, such as academic advising, academic success, mental health, finances, sexualized violence prevention, and more. Bringing folks who are knowledgeable on those topics on board can help

ensure you are conveying the most important information to students, using the language and approach adopted by your institution. Content experts can help inform the learning outcomes for a topic, assist with developing and editing content, and help ensure the program is always up-to-date on the topic. During the development of UVic's Pre-Arrival Program, we created a subject matter expert committee (SMEC) for each of our program modules that brought together folks from a number of different departments who had a stake in the topic. Through conversations with these committees, we were able to develop our learning outcomes for each module, create frameworks for each activity we wanted to develop, and receive feedback to ensure the information we were providing to students was accurate and on message.

Who: This is very dependant on the topic being covered, but often involves staff from a variety of other student affairs and services departments on campus.

Skills and knowledge: Content expertise

The Instructional Designer Role

The instructional designer role is responsible for designing the course in the online environment. When many of the other roles contribute to deciding what content to include, what approaches to take, etc., the instructional designer is responsible for sitting down at their computer and bringing all the ideas and decisions to life. They contribute to the conversations about learning outcomes, approaches, and learning activity type, as they are able to provide insight on what is possible within the learning platform and what is not. They are then responsible for designing the learning activities, seeking and implementing feedback, and also typically the role that inputs all the developed content and activities into the chosen course system, although the technical role may also be required here as well.

Who: The instructional designer role is typically held by the project lead, but often will be supplemented by staff in the institution's Learning and Teaching Centre, or may be contracted out to individuals with expertise in instructional design and/or certain software. We worked closely with our partners in Technology Integrated Learning (TIL) at UVic, and they were immeasurably helpful in providing insight on what was possible within our learning management system, assisting with the design of activities using Articulate Storyline, brainstorming innovative ideas, and more.

Skills and knowledge: Instructional design, media and technology attributes and functions

The Researcher Role

The researcher role seeks out and engages with new knowledge that is relevant to the overall program. They focus on ensuring that the program is up-to-date and is meeting student needs. This role is extremely important at the beginning of the project as the structure and overall approach of the program are being developed. This role helps to identify the existing gaps that the program is to help fill, and stays up-to-date on best practices in online student engagement. While the researcher role and the content expert role may overlap in some areas, it's important to note that they are not the same. Content experts are expected to be up-to-date on certain topics within the program; the researcher is expected to be up-to-date on what topics should be included in the program in the first place. It's also important to note that while the researcher has an important role at the beginning of the project, this role continues to be important even after the program has been developed in order to ensure the program does not become outdated and ineffective.

Who: This role is often filled by the project lead, although the role may also sometimes be delegated to someone else who will conduct

and environmental scan or a literature review for the project lead. Some parts of this role may also be filled by folks not associated with the project at all, as previous work in this area may have initiated the project in the first place.

Skills and knowledge: Academic research, student needs, student engagement

The Evaluator Role

The evaluator role evaluates the program on a regular basis in order to suggest improvements. They may review participation rates, assessment results, student feedback, and overall student needs in order to fulfill their role. While most of the work involved in this role occurs after the program has been implemented, it's important that evaluation also has a presence in the development of the program, in order to ensure that the proper data is being collected and that processes are in place to be able to conduct a thorough evaluation. The evaluator role is often responsible for producing project wrap-up reports and recommendations for the future.

Who: This role is often filled by the project lead, but may also sometimes include others, particularly student staff or perhaps content experts, who are asked for their perspective and opinion on certain aspects of the program or certain learning activities.

Skills and knowledge: Data analysis (quantitative and qualitative), evaluation techniques, survey design, communication

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How to use an outcomes-based approach to design an online orientation

Creating an online orientation program from scratch is a large and complex project. Where do you start, how do you get organized, and how do you make sure you're not skipping steps and needing to backtrack later? Using an instructional design framework can help you systematically design, develop, and deliver your program, and help your project progress in a good way.

There are many different instructional design frameworks; however, none seemed to quite fit our project. In evaluating learning design frameworks, they either included steps that were irrelevant for this type of online learning, or I felt like they lumped too many design-related tasks into one step. The outcomes-based approach outlined below combines elements of the ADDIE instructional design framework with key components of outcome-based education to create a seven-step process for creating an online orientation program.

Outcome-based education

Outcome-based education is a student-centred approach to learning that focuses on what a student should be able to do in the real world after they have completed the program. Education can often be quite content focused; we identify a topic we want to teach students about, and then we pull together some content that talks about that topic. Outcome-based education focuses on the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that we want a student to have at

the end of a course, rather than what course content needs to be covered. Designing curriculum using an outcomes-based approach takes a backwards approach to that used in designing curriculum the traditional way. Once learning outcomes have been determined, you first determine how learning will be assessed, the choose or build relevant learning activities and experiences, and then determine what content is required. All the while, the focus is always on helping a student achieve the learning outcome. There are several benefits to taking an outcomes-based approach to designing an online orientation program.

- It puts your students at the forefront of your design process
- It helps narrow the focus of your program. Orientation is often a dumping ground for information, and it can easily become a catch-all. Defining specific outcomes helps set boundaries on what will and will not be included.
- It makes it easy to say no. It can be hard to turn people away who want to add something to an orientation program, and those are often difficult conversations to navigate. However, when you're using an outcomes-based approach… if it doesn't help students reach one of the learning outcomes, it's not included in the program.
- It creates a common understanding among your team. While there may be varied understandings of the ultimate goal when you say you want to talk about academics or mental health, the goal is unequivocally clear once you have created learning outcomes.
- It pushes you to think more about creating learning activities that require active engagement, rather than content that will be passively consumed.

The Outcomes-Based Approach

Phase 1: Create a vision

Step 1: Do your research

Identify why the program is needed, who the program is for, and how the program fits into the bigger picture. This may involve conducting a needs analysis, creating student profiles, and mapping out all of your orientation and/or student success programming.

Step 2: Outline your vision

Identify the overall goals of your program. What are you hoping the program will achieve? Your vision should also include any core principles or approaches you plan on integrating into your program. After you have created your vision, you should share it widely; anyone who will be involved in the project should be aware of your goals and core principles.

Step 3: Identify your topics / buckets

Based on your needs assessment, identify the high-level topics that your online orientation will contain. What are the areas that your program needs to cover in order to be useful to students? It can be helpful to provide a quick definition for each topic area as well, so that everyone can be on the same page about what you are thinking. For example, if your topic is health, does that mean

physical health? Mental health? All 8 dimensions of health? The scope and definitions of your topics may shift as you go through steps 4 and 5, but completing this step will give you a good place to start.

Phase 2: Design your learning activities

Step 4: Identify key learning themes

In my experience, we often go straight from a broad topic to defining specific learning outcomes, without taking the time to think broadly about all the possibilities. This step asks you to think about all those possibilities before creating your learning outcomes. For each topic identified in step 3, start by brainstorming everything you can think of that could be useful in relation to that topic, without making any judgements on the merit of the suggestion. This could be done independently, or with a group. Once all thoughts are on the table, you can begin to identify commonalities and themes, and have conversations about whether any items that have come up should be left out of your program. Repeat step 4 for each of the topics you have identified in step 3.

Step 5: Develop your learning outcomes

Pulling from the themes identified in step 4, begin crafting your learning outcomes. What do you want your students to know, do, or value about this topic as a result of completing your program? Consider the level of learning (as per Bloom's taxonomy) that you would like students to have, and ensure your learning outcomes are measurable. It's also important to ensure that that your outcomes describe something that a student will be able to do after

completing the program, not a process or activity that they will do within the program. Don't be afraid to spend a large amount of time creating your learning outcomes; developing strong learning outcomes makes developing strong learning activities much easier.

Step 6: Decide on your learning activities

For each learning outcome, determine what kind of activity students will complete to help them reach the learning outcome. Students learn best by actively doing things, and making meaning of those experiences, not by passively consuming content, so when deciding on your learning activities, think about how you can make them interactive. While some activities may cover more than one learning outcome, aim to create one activity for each outcome.

Step 7: Draft your learning activities

Once you have identified what the learning activity will be, it's time to create a draft! It's generally best to create a low-tech draft before you try to create the activity using a specific tool, so that you can focus on the content and pedagogy without being distracted by features of the technology. Drafting the learning activity may involve bringing together a group of people for another brainstorming session to help identify the major points that should be covered in the activity, and create a framework, before fleshing it out in full. Any content reviews should also take place during this step.

Phase 3: Develop the program

Step 8: Take a step back

Once you have drafted all your learning activities, take a moment to step back and look at the project as a whole. Consider how your different activities connect and work together, and revisit the goals and principles you identified in your initial vision. Does it feel like there are gaps in any topic areas? Are you still meeting your initial goals? Have you strayed from your initial principles? It's easier to make changes during the draft stage, rather then wait until everything has been created in its final form!

Step 9: Create your learning activities

It's time to take your drafts and bring them to life! During this step, you can take your draft content and turn it into a real-life activity using whichever software tool you have chosen. This step can often be quite time-intensive, especially if you are learning new programs or tools, but it's also one of the most fun, because you get to see your ideas really come to life!

Step 10: Put the activities all together as a program

At this point in the process, you have a bunch of different learning activities and content pieces. Now it's time to put them all in your learning management system (or equivalent), ensure they all function properly, and ensure that the structure and navigation of your program are intuitive and clear. During this step, you may also add visuals to some activities. Once everything has been loaded into the system and looks the way you want it, it's time to test the

program thoroughly. If you can, have multiple people go through the program, using a variety of different devices (computer, tablet, mobile phone) and browsers to ensure that everything works the way it should. Be clear with your testers on the type of feedback you're looking for… now is likely not the time to hear that you should add additional content to an activity!

Phase 4: Implement and evaluate

Step 11: Implement your program

Open your program up to your students! While the course is open, make sure you are monitoring the course on a regular basis. Respond to any student questions, and keep an eye out for anything that doesn't seem to be working as it should. While it's unlikely that you're going to be able to make major changes while the program is live, it's good to look for any activities that students don't seem to be completing, activities that are taking longer than expected, etc., so that you can identify and fix any errors or problems.

Step 12: Evaluate and make changes

Once students have been given the opportunity to complete the program, it's time to evaluate how it went. Review any analytics and feedback to determine what worked well, and what may need improvements. Were your goals met? Identify any areas you may want to learn more about, and document any changes you may need to make in the future. In this step, you should also report back to any project stakeholders on how the project went, and your plans for the future. Creating an online orientation program from

scratch is not a simple process; there are a lot of steps and a lot of tasks involved. However, using the outcomes-based approach can help you streamline your approach, be intentional about the content you are including, and ensure your students finish the program with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that you want them to gain.

References

- The ADDIE method of instructional design
- Outcome-based learning and training

How to choose an online system for your online orientation

One of the first decisions you'll make when creating an online orientation program is choosing which platform you will use to host the program. For many people, this is a decision that they fall into, rather than consciously make after thinking through all the options. But even if you think you already know the platform you'll be using, I would encourage you to take some time to think through all of the options. The platform can impact usability, access, assessment, the types of activities available, cost, and more, so it's an important decision!

Generally, there are three categories that the platform used to host online orientation programs fall into: a website, the institution's learning management system (LMS), or a software product.

Feature	**Website**	**LMS**	**Software product**
Content type: Text	Yes	Yes	Yes
Content type: Images	Yes	Yes	Yes
Content type: Video	Yes	Yes	Yes
Content type: Polls	No	Yes	Yes
Content type: Quizzes	No	Yes	Yes
Login	No	Yes	Yes
Track individual user behaviour	No	Yes	Yes
Tailored content	No	Yes	Yes
Plays with other programs	Some	Most	Unlikely
Cost	Low	Low	High

Content type

Most websites, LMSs, and software platforms allow you to easily add content in the form of text, images, or embedded videos. An LMS of software platform will typically also allow you to create polls, quizzes, and other types of assessment. While polls and quizzes are possible in a website, it would require embedding or linking to something that has been created using a separate tool.

Login

To access an online orientation program created as a website, a learner would generally not need to login, as the site would be widely available to the public. For an online orientation program created in a learning management system or software product, a login would generally be required, and the program would not be available to the public. Depending on the LMS or software product used, it may be possible to create a guest login that can be used by folks who are not students; this is generally easier for a software product than an LMS.

Track individual user behaviour

A website generally does not allow you to track individual behaviour; analytics such as page views, time on page, etc. are only available in aggregate. This means that if an online orientation program is created as a website, it is impossible to determine how many students completed the program, or if an individual student viewed certain topics or activities. Both the LMS and most software products can track individual behaviour. Choosing these platforms for your online orientation program means you can determine how

many students completed the program, which topics were most popular, the amount of time students spent in the system, and you can determine what an individual student completed, if needed.

Tailored content

Often, when creating an online orientation program, we may want certain content pieces to be available only to a subset of students. For example, only international students need to see the content related to study permits and Canadian banking, and online students probably don't need to be taught how to navigate campus. While a website may allow you to label or section off content for specific groups, it doesn't allow you to hide it altogether. Both the LMS and most software platforms do allow for this functionality.

Plays with other programs

In reality, all three platform options are quite limited when it comes to creating interactive content. Even relatively simple activities, such as scenario-based activities, matching games, and flashcards are often not possible using just the functionality of the platform. Luckily, other tools exist that can create these types of activities, such as Articulate 365, H5P, Kaltura, and more. While you would need to check for your particular circumstances, most websites and learning management systems allow you to embed Articulate, H5P and Kaltura content. These other tools are least likely to be able to be embedded within an online orientation platform created by an external company, as there is no real benefit to the company to do so.

Cost

For most student affairs professionals, cost will be a critical factor when deciding what type of platform to choose. A website is generally a low-cost option, as most institutions already have the infrastructure required to create a website. One factor to keep in mind if you plan to create an online orientation program as a website is that this website should be visually different from the main institutional website in order to give it an identity as a distinct program; this branding may incur some additional costs. Building your program using your institution's LMS will also generally be low cost, as the system and support already exist at your institution. If you plan to use any additional software tools to create interactive content types to embed in the LMS, you may occur some additional costs. Using an external software platform is undoubtedly the most expensive option, as you will have to pay an external vendor. Most companies have both a start-up fee and an annual fee, so you will continue to pay as long as your program continues to exist. The system you choose to host your online orientation program depends on your needs and your vision for the program. But I highly encourage you to think through your options before you make a decision… because you definitely don't want to have to create the program twice!

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Setting up your course platform

When designing an online orientation program, we often spend a lot of time thinking about and creating our content and learning activities. We want them to be high quality so that students remain engaged and meet our learning outcomes. What can sometimes be neglected along the way is the design of the course platform, but this is also a critical component to success. Every effort should be made to ensure a course has a high degree of usability.

> *Usability: a measure of how easily learners can complete the tasks associated with completing the course, such as enrolling in the course platform, navigating through the course, uploading assignments, posting in forums, watching video clips, or submitting quiz answers.*

Usability is important, as students who struggle to complete the basic tasks associated with completing a course are more likely to become frustrated, less likely to be motivated to engage with course content, and less likely to complete the course. Usability is especially important in an online orientation; since the course is so short, and is not mandatory, students are generally unwilling to invest much time in learning the system.

Structure and navigation

If a student can't easily navigate your course and understand what is required, you're going to have difficulty getting them to complete the program.

- Right from the beginning of the course, you should provide students with a clear picture of what is required to complete the course. The home page should provide an overview of all the modules and topics being covered; sub-topics should also be made obvious from the home page, as this has been found to increase the rate at which those topics are accessed, and provides students with more context about what is contained within a module.
- The course should be laid out in a way that ensures all content, activities and features are easy to access, and not hidden in hard-to-find places. If a student can't find an activity, or can't find their way back to an activity, they can't complete it!
- Help a student following along with your larger narrative, and you progression through a topic, by organizing information logically, with related ideas grouped together, and unrelated ideas separated out. These groupings should be obvious to the students, which can be done by using headings, page breaks, and visual indicators of separation, such as lines or boxes.
- Navigating from one piece of content to the next should be a clear and easy process, with as few steps required as possible. Every time a student has to actively think about what to do next, as opposed to just clicking 'next,' there is an increased chance that they will opt to abandon the course altogether.
- The system should provide clear and obvious information about a student's progress. Make it easy to identify which activities have been completed, which remain, and how much work is left.

Instructions

In an online orientation program, providing clear instructions is critical. Students need to understand what they are being asked to do within an activity from a learning and application perspective (i.e.

choose the correct answer from the list, match the item with the correct price) and then also be provided with instructions on how to do that within the learning system (e.g. click the correct answer to select, drag the item to the corresponding price tag). Instructions on how to complete actions often aren't required in face-to-face learning as the actions to take are intuitive, but this often doesn't translate to the online environment. Online, a student also has less contextual clues indicating what to do, cannot observe their peers, and does not have immediate access to an instructor for assistance. Instructions needs to be incredibly clear and detailed.

Technology help

It's impossible to create an online orientation program and avoid technology; the use of technology is inherent in the fact that you are creating an online program. When creating an online orientation program, it's important to mitigate any possible technology problems, as every time a student encounters a tech problem, their probability of completing the program decreases. You should test your course rigourously, making sure every component works the way you intended. Enlist multiple people to help test who are able to view the course with fresh eyes. You should also test your program using a variety of devices including laptops, tablets, and mobile phones, and both PCs and Macs. You should also test on all the common web browsers. Your program may work perfectly well on one device, or in one browser, but not at all on another. After rapidly transitioning our program to a new LMS for summer 2020, we discovered post-launch that some activities didn't work in Safari, and had to come up with a strategy on the spot to overcome that issue. Would not recommend.

Even after you rigourously test your program, it's inevitable that some students will encounter problems of some sort, whether it's the fault of the system, or they've done something incorrectly. It's

important to ensure that tech help is readily available, and to communicate that to students.

- Provide students with an email or phone number they can use to contact someone if they are having difficulties.
- If you can proactively identify possible issues a student may encounter, provide solutions in an FAQ (you can bet that "don't use Safari" now lives in our FAQ!).
- Create a "help" discussion board within the course, where students can both post questions, and provide solutions to other students.
- Depending on the complexity of your course, you may also wish to encourage students to take a virtual tour of the course environment before they start the program, so they can proactively solve any problems before they dive into the content.

Design

While you don't necessarily have to be a professional graphic designer to create an online orientation program, it's important to recognize that the look and feel of course activities matters. Pages should be visual appealing, with thought given to colours, shapes, fonts, and white space. Students spend a lot of time online, and can be very judgemental about the quality of the content they consume. A visually appealing design increases the time a student will spend on the page, and leads them to believe that the course is easily navigable. It quite literally increases their desire to engage with the course, so take advantage!

Designing your content and learning activities is important, but leave time to design your learning platform too!

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How to get students to like your text-based content

Text-based content often gets a bad reputation as a learning activity, and students often complain when a course is heavily text-based. "Less text please" was a common comment we received about our Pre-Arrival Program – and the program had very few activities that were even text-based! However, text can be an effective way to convey information. It's poor reputation likely comes from the fact that students perceive multimedia as an easier path to achievement. Text-based activities feel like work, even if they actually aren't any more work than other activity types.

Whether or not students like text-based content, writing text is an inevitable part of creating an online orientation program. Unless your program is 100% video-based, you're going to be writing, whether it's an introduction to a video, the text of an interactive scenario, of the content for an entirely text-based activity. For any text-based content or activities that you are including in your program, here are a few tips to help ensure they are well-received by your students!

- **Limit the amount of text.** Keep your text-based activities, or your introductions to multimedia activities, as short as possible, while still conveying all the required information. Text-based activities are often the parts of a program where it's easiest to lose students, especially in a program where completion is voluntary!
- **Write like a human talking to another human.** Use an informal, conversational tone, and write in first person, speaking directly to the student. This allows the student to feel connected to what is being said, and to more easily incorporate the knowledge into their existing schema

- **Use short paragraphs and short sentences.** They are easier to follow as a reader, and create a sense of movement in the text.
- **Use headings.** Headings help provide structure and context to the content, and help to prevent a student from getting lost as they work their way through a topic.
- **Use bullet points and lists** where applicable, rather than paragraphs. This eliminates the need for the extra words or flowery language that are sometimes required to string together different ideas. It also helps the student to quickly see what is important.
- **Add images or other visual elements when possible.** A page full of only words can seem daunting. Adding images, even if they don't reduce the amount of text a student must read, makes the content seem friendlier and more inviting. Pull quotes can have the same effect, while also highlighting key points.
- **Don't be afraid to include humour!** Just because you work for an institution, doesn't mean your program has to sound institutional. You're writing is allowed to have personality!
- **Avoid acronyms and institutional jargon.** Our institutions are full of acronyms and jargon that is unique to our world, and because we live with that language every day, we sometimes forget that a new student might not have a clue what we're talking about when we say "Registrar's Office," "credit hours," or "at the SUB." Either avoid that language entirely, or use your program to explain those terms to your students.
- **Copy edit a million and one times**. Not only does copy editing increase the readability of your content, but a program riddled with mistakes might impact the credibility of your content.

Text-based content might seem easy, as we all write content on a daily basis (hi, emails!). Writing good text-based content, however, is still an art!

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Top tools for creating interactive content and videos

There are probably thousands of tools online that can help you create interactive content, and all of them have their own pros and cons. Here are some of the best tools for creating interactive activities and videos for your online orientation.

Articulate Storyline

Articulate Storyline is a cloud-based authoring tool that allows you to build interactive e-learning modules and online courses. The interface is similar to PowerPoint, but also allows you to produce simulations, quizzes, drag-and-drop interactions, screen recordings, and many other interactions. Most of the interactive activities within UVic's Pre-Arrival Program were built using

Articulate Storyline. Activities built in Storyline can be embedded in most learning management systems. Articulate offers a ton of different templates you can use, and has a robust community that can provide support when needed. Because of all the features offered, getting started with Storyline can be a steep learning curve.

Cost: A personal plan costs $499 USD/year. A team plan costs $649 USD per user, per year. A plan gives you access to Articulate 360, which includes both Storyline and Rise.

Articulate Rise

Articulate Rise is a web-based e-learning course builder that makes it easy to quickly create well-designed e-learning courses. The platform is user-friendly, can be used to quickly develop a course, and allows for text, video, interactive graphics, and multiple choice capabilities. However, the platform has a limited ability to customize and limited formatting abilities (that's part of the reason it's so easy to use), and less opportunity for creativity (when compared to Storyline). Rise is a great option when a course has a lot of material for a user to read.

Cost: A personal plan costs $499 USD/year. A team plan costs $649 USD per user, per year. A plan gives you access to Articulate 360, which includes both Storyline and Rise.

Adobe Captivate

Adobe Captivate is an authoring tool that is used for creating e-learning content such as software demonstrations, software simulations, branched scenarios, and randomized quizzes. Using Adobe Captivate, you can convert existing PowerPoint content to interactive videos, create virtual reality walkthroughs, record

talking-head screencasts, create multi-module branched courses, add interactions and quizzing, and more.

I've never used Adobe Captivate, but I haven't heard great things from those who have.

Cost: $44.99/month; free 30-day trial available

H5P

H5P empowers everyone to create rich and interactive web experiences with only a web browser and a website with an H5P plug-in, or a learning management system that has the appropriate integration (and all the major one's do!). It allows you to create a number of different content types, including interactive video, presentations, branching scenarios, drag-and-drop, flashcards, hotspots, multiple-choice, memory games, and more. Creating interactive content with H5P is relatively simple; however, you have a limited ability to customize or design your content.

Cost: H5P is a completely free and open technology.

Timeline JS

Timeline JS is an open-source tools that allows you to build rich, interactive timelines using just a Google spreadsheet. Your able to describe each event with text and hyperlinks and images, and add media from a variety of sources, including Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, Google Maps, Wikipedia, and more. Timeline JS should work on most websites.

Cost: Timeline JS is free!

Kaltura

Create interactive videos

Kaltura is a video content management system that helps you manage, publish, distribute and analyze video content. The reason it's on this list of tools is because of its interactive video editing tools. Using Kaltura, you can create interactive video paths, video quizzes, add hotspots, and more.

Cost: Kaltura is typically purchased by an institution as an enterprise solution. Check to see if your institution has it! There's also a free 30-day trial.

Screencastify

Screencastify is a popular screen recording app used to record, edit and share videos. Using Screencastify, you can capture a tab, your whole screen, or just your webcam, embed your webcam in your video, use the mouse to spotlight areas of the screen, and use a drawing pen tool. Videos autosave to Google Drive, and can be uploaded directly the YouTube. The tool operates as a Google Chrome extension (so you do need to use Chrome as your browser), and is well known for its simplicity.

Cost: Free

Camtasia

Camtasia is a all-in-one screen recorder and video editor that allows you to record your powscreen, add video effects, transitions, and more. Camtasia is full of features, including pre-built assets, a library of royalty-free music, basic quizzing interactivity, annotations, animations, background removal, and more. Camtasia

also allows you to create themes, so that you can maintain consistent branding across different videos.

Cost: one-time fee of $320.49 CAD; some institutions are able to provide Camtasia access to employees

Powtoon

Powtoon is a visual communication platform that allows you to create professional and fully customized videos and animations. Using Powtoon, you can easily created animated videos, explainer videos, and whiteboard videos.

Cost: There is a free version, but videos are limited to three minutes, and contain Powtoon branding. Premium packages start at $19.99 USD/month.

Check your LMS

While we can sometimes get drawn in by fancy tools, don't forget that your LMS has some capabilities for interactive activities too! While the functions are generally limited, many LMSs allow you to create polls, multiple choice questions, fill-in-the-blanks, and basic drag-and-drop and hotspot interactions. They also allow for assignment submissions, if you want students to download an activity to complete.

Cost: Free!

8 reasons why students may not complete your online orientation

Online courses don't have the best reputation when it comes to completion rates. In for-credit university and college courses, where the incentive to complete is gaining the course credit, online courses have an attrition rate of 24 – 40%, significantly higher than the attrition rate of 10 – 20% seen in face-to-face courses. Massive open online courses (MOOCs), which are typically taken voluntarily by learners with an interest in the topic, have an attrition rate around 97%. Even for verified students in MOOCs, who have paid a fee to take the course, 54% of students never complete the course.

If getting students to complete a course that they have paid for, that they have a demonstrated interest in, or that will get them closer to degree completion is a struggle, that doesn't bode well for an online orientation program.

Based on both research and experience, here are 8 reasons why a new student might not complete your online orientation program.

1. They didn't know the program existed

If a student doesn't even know the program exists, how can they be expected to complete it? Marketing and promotion is critical for an online orientation program. Students need to be told about the program repeatedly, through different forms of media (email, social media, in-person events, etc.). Find as many ways as possible to get your program in front of students.

2. They forgot

This is one of the most frustrating reasons to hear as someone who oversees an online orientation program, but a relatively common one that we heard from students. They knew about the program, and they may have even started it (which means you did something right to get them to that point!), and then they just forgot to come back and finish the rest. Marketing and promotion comes back into play here. It's not enough to tell students at the beginning of the summer and never again. Constantly referring to the program throughout the pre-arrival period, and sending specific reminders to students who have started, but not completed, will increase your completion rates.

3. They didn't have enough time

This is typically the most common reason why someone doesn't complete an online course, and is also a reason I heard often from students with respect to UVic's Pre-Arrival Program. People are busy, and completing an online orientation takes time (even if it is only a few hours). Create your course so that it can be completed in a realistic amount of time, and let your students know that timeframe! One of the most common pieces of feedback we get is that they want our program to be shorter; it currently takes about three hours. I'm not sure how short we would have to make the program to make those comments go away (I suspect there would be no satisfying everyone), but length is definitely an important consideration. It's also worth considering the window of time that students are given to complete the program. The shorter the window, the more likely a student may have demands on their time during that time period. The longer the window, the more opportunity you given students to procrastinate!

This brings us to the second part of the "not enough time" reasoning. Sometimes it's not that they didn't have enough time. It's that a student didn't use the time that they had, thinking they would still have time later, and now that time has run out. For most new students, the end of the summer can be quite busy as they shop for their new living spaces, say goodbye to their friends and family, travel and move for school, and start in-person orientation programming. Any strategies you can implement to encourage students to complete the program earlier in the summer, and not leave it to the last week, with likely benefit your completion rates (and your students!). We sprinkled contest deadlines throughout the summer (i.e. if they completed module A and B by July 15, they'd be entered in a contest; finishing modules C and D by Aug. 1 would enter them in a different contest). It wasn't a perfect solution and didn't work for everyone, but it definitely encouraged some students to finish earlier!

4. They didn't think the program was for them

We received this feedback primarily from transfer students, mature students, and online students (pre-COVID). They assumed that the program was geared towards on-campus students, and students coming straight from high school, and so dismissed it as something they did not need to invest time in completing. While they were not exactly wrong – our initial version of the program was created with our straight-from-high-school student audience top-of-mind – we still thought there were many parts of the program that would be beneficial to mature, transfer and online students. This is where the importance of tailored content becomes evident, but also where marketing comes into play again. It's worth thinking about how your messaging will appeal to all the different audiences you hope to reach, and whether you need separate marketing strategies for different groups of students.

5. It seemed unnecessary

Ouch, right? In our feedback, some students thought they would be able to easily figure it all out as they went, or they indicated that they had siblings or friends who already went to UVic. They felt that they could learn whatever they needed to know from those friends. This comes back to your marketing messaging again. Knowing that these students exist, what can you say to try and convince them of the helpfulness of your program?

For other students, it's not that the program as a whole was deemed unnecessary – just certain topics or activities. Some student felt that they already had a strong handle on certain topics, so they skipped those sections. This was often a rationale we heard from transfer and mature students, who often skipped the finance section and the substance use section, for example. It was also sometimes a rationale from straight-from-high-school students who skipped sections, including substance use and sexualized violence prevention… which is a little more concerning!

6. Lack of motivation

Learners who believe that your online orientation is interesting, useful, and important are more likely to be satisfied with the program, and more likely to complete it. Learners who are bored and disinterested while completing the program are more likely to abandon it and not return. People like enjoyable things. The more you can do to ensure your content is meeting student needs, is clear and well-designed, and is fun and engaging for students to complete, the more likely your students will be to complete the program – and learn from it.

7. Lack of social support

We can market our online orientation programs and sing their praises all we want, but we can never negate the influence that family and friends have on a student's behaviour. If the word-on-the-street from other students is that the program is boring or unhelpful, new students are much more likely to ignore your messaging. If other students are saying positive things about the program, new students are much more likely to complete the program. Family members, current students, or even other new students who talk about the program or ask questions about the program demonstrate that they perceive the program as useful, influencing the new student's perception of the usefulness of the program as well.

8. The course is not well-designed and intuitive

If a student cannot easily enroll in the course, navigate the course platform, and figure out how to use any technology involved, the likelihood that they will not complete the course increases. The same result holds if they regularly encounter technology problems throughout the course. It's important that the course be accessible on all browser types and all devices; if it's not that needs to be clearly stated upfront so that students can access the program in a way that won't cause problems for them. It's easy to think that a student who encounters a problem will send you an email and ask for your help, but the reality is that a very small percentage of students will do that; most will just move on. In June 2020, UVic moved to a brand new learning management system, and we had to move our entire program over in the span of just a few weeks. While we did our best to test everything, we discovered while the program was live that some activities could not be accessed if you

were using Safari as a browser, and that for some students, random activities weren't properly triggering completion. While we tried to solve those problems, and provide appropriate messaging where no solution could be found, it was obvious when looking at completion data that some students had encountered those issues, and abandoned the program, leaving those activities incomplete, without asking for help.

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How to motivate students using course design

A lack of motivation is one of the most common reasons why a student does not complete an online course. This causes problems for an online orientation program, as such programs typically have no clear, inherent motivator. Unlike an academic course, the work that a student puts into an online orientation program does not result in a grade or academic credit; it simply helps set them up for success. While students in a for-credit course may persevere through boredom or being uninterested, all in pursuit of that grade and credit, in an online orientation, that perseverance likely doesn't exist. An online orientation must, therefore, be well-designed and engaging in order to motivate a student to complete.

Keller's ARCS theory of motivation defines for major conditions that have to be met for a student to become and remain motivated: attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction. While this theory was not designed explicitly for online learning, but for instructional materials more broadly, it can be extremely useful in the design of an online orientation program.

Attention

The attention condition asks you to consider how you can both capture and sustain attention throughout the learning activity or course.

- **Create conflict the student will desire to resolve.** Remind students of the questions they might have, so that they want to stick around to find out the answers. Create a sense of conflict in any scenario-based activities (i.e. Someone needs your help!)

- Use concrete examples. Students hate being given generic information. They want to be able to see themselves at the institution. They want to be able to paint a picture in their mind. Concrete examples and stories are much more engaging than generalizations and vagueness. Plus, they generally add value beyond what is already available on your institution's website.
- Vary the format and medium of instruction. A student who is asked to do the same thing over and over again, whether it's read text, watch video, navigate a scenario, or answer multiple-choice questions, is much more likely to get bored than a student who is constantly being faced with new activity types. Even activity types that may seem trendy in the moment won't sustain attention if they are overused.
- **Give your program some personality.** Just because you're creating a program for an institution, doesn't mean the program has to feel institutional. Be friendly throughout, sprinkle in some humour, and throw in a few small, unexpected surprises. It keeps the program from feeling routine, and inserting small pieces that are unexpected or cause your students to react in a positive way recaptures your students' attention.
- **Create activities in which the student must actively participate.** This may include activities such as games, role plays, and simulations. It's much easier to capture and sustain a students attention if they are actively engaged, rather than passively participating. These activities should feel purposeful, however, or else a student may simply feel like they are being asked to do meaningless busywork.
- **Make navigation easy.** The easiest place to lose a student's attention is often in the transition from one activity to another. While this is sometimes inevitable, as this is a natural pausing point, the simpler the navigation to the next activity is, the more likely a student will remain engaged with the program without even questioning whether they should continue. If

they can simply end up at the next activity without having to actively think about it, they are much more likely to keep completing activities.

Relevance

The relevance condition asks you to ensure that the course and learning activities seem relevant to the learner, both in the present moment, and in relation to their future.

- **Make it apparent how what they are learning builds on previous skills.** Higher education isn't an entirely new experience for most students, where they need to build a whole bunch of new skills from scratch. Most students already have basic academic, social and wellness skills and habits. Emphasize that they are bringing all kinds of positive attributes to this new experience, and then explain how their previous skills and experiences might be useful, and might need to be altered slightly in their new environment.
- **Explain how program content connects to current needs.** It's important that a student understand why they are learning about a certain topic. We clear how each topic is relevant for a student, and what the goal in completing the learning activity is. This also means you should carefully consider the topics and activities you include in the program; if the topic does not pertain to current needs, but instead addresses some perceived future need, your online orientation program may not be the best place for that content.
- **Provide choice in how a student can engage with your program.** Forcing students to learn about a topic they are uninterested in, at a time when they are uninterested, is practically a guaranteed way to ensure that a student will not be motivated to complete the program. Consider any decisions

around gatekeeping content carefully (i.e. requiring students to complete Activity A or Module A before gaining access to Activity B or Module B). We gave students access to all program content at the same time, without any restrictions, as we didn't want a lack of interest in finances, for example, to stop a student from being able to access content about preventing sexualized violence.

- **Sharing stories of current students, alumni, or even professors.** You can tell students your content is relevant all you want, but ultimately, "you" are the institution, and your opinions are a little suspect. Stories shared from current students, alumni, and even professors provide examples of the relevance of your program's content in a way that is unarguable!

Confidence

A student needs to feel as though some level of success is possible if they are going to invest their time in a learning activity or course. In the case of an online orientation program, they need to believe that both completing the program is possible, and that succeeding in university is possible. This is what the confidence condition asks you to consider.

- **Clearly state learning goals and criteria for evaluation and/or completion.** A student should know what they are aiming to achieve by completing the program and/or learning activity, and understand what completion looks like. If you require students to complete all parts of the program, be clear about how many topics there are, and the fact that they all need to be completed to achieve program completion. It can also be helpful to explain how to tell if an activity has been completed within the system. In Brightspace, for example, an activity will

display with a checkmark once the student has met the completion criteria.

- **Be clear about the time commitment.** This applies to both the entire program, and to each module and activity, and can help a student create realistic expectations. If a student feels as though an activity is taking longer than it should, they are more likely to get frustrated and give up. Honestly, if they even ask themselves the question, "Am I almost done?" while doing the activity, the likelihood that they will abandon the activity is increased. Helping them understand that an activity could take a significant amount of time can help prevent the impatience to be done. This is especially important for any activities that might be longer than your average activity.
- **Deliver material in order of increasing difficulty.** Start with the easier content, and build towards concepts that are progressively more difficult. This helps a student to build confidence incrementally, and decreases the likelihood that they become frustrated or overwhelmed.
- **Share stories of students who have struggled, then achieved.** It's easy for a student to think that if they are struggling, they are not good enough, will never succeed, etc. We know, however, that this is not true. So let your students see that it's not true too! It's important to help students understand that challenges are inevitable, and can be overcome!

Satisfaction

Every effort should be made to make students feel good about their accomplishments throughout the program, and about their participation in the program as a whole. If a student is satisfied and enjoying their learning experience, the chance that they'll continue to participate is pretty high!

- **Provide feedback as frequently as possible.** In my opinion, there is very little that is more frustrating then being expected to learn something, but being given no feedback on how you're doing. Incorporate informative, helpful, and motivating feedback into your activities as often as possible. Try to go beyond simple checkmarks and X's where possible. This could be as simple as providing explanations of why an answer is wrong, or adding a message that says "Great job!" or "That's right!" to a correct answer.
- **Incorporate unexpected rewards and experiences.** Surprise and delight your students! This doesn't have to be something elaborate or time intensive, but sprinkling in unexpected surprises has a positive effect on a student's satisfaction with your program. In one of our scenario-based activities, the student in the scenario quite literally got on their skateboard and rolled off the side of the screen at the end of the activity… and students loved it enough to bring it up specifically in our feedback questions. Small things sprinkled throughout really do make a difference!
- **Provide a sense of achievement.** Completing an online orientation should be rewarding and rewarded in some way. Track a student's progress throughout the program, and make sure it is displayed for the student to see. This may mean ensuring completed activities are checked off, or having a widget that indicates what percentage of the program they have completed so far. Badging and certificates can also help promote a sense of achievement, whether they are provided for completing certain combinations of activities, completing individual topics, or completing the entire program.
- **Don't patronize the student by over-rewarding easy tasks.** New students often have a real aversion to being treated as "children," so feedback positive encouragement, and even surprises need to avoid creating that feeling in students. It can be a fine line to walk, and if I'm being honest, you probably won't get it right for absolutely every student.

The ultimate goal of incorporating the ARCS theory of motivation into the design of your online orientation program is to ensure that a student does not become disillusioned with your program. We want to prevent a student from getting bored, frustrated, or questioning why they are completing the program while in the midst of doing so. A student who is engaged throughout the entire process of completing the course is much more likely to get to the end than a student who constantly has to be putting effort and energy into continuing!

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7 things to consider in your marketing strategy

Designing an online orientation program is a lot of work, and can take a lot of time. I hate to be the one to tell you this, but at the same time you are designing your program, you also need to be creating a comprehensive marketing and promotions strategy. While it would be great if students could just magically find the program and decide to complete it on their own, that's pretty unlikely. Even just knowing about the program likely isn't going to be enough to get most students to complete it. If humans were good at doing the things we know we should do, we would all exercise more, eat healthier, and spend less time with Netflix.
Here are a few things to consider when developing your marketing strategy.

Be clear about goals

As a first step to getting students to complete an online orientation program, it is important to ensure that your students know that the program exists and can identify one or more reasons why they should complete the program; reasons that will spur them to enroll or access the program initially. Be clear about what the program is, why a student should complete it, and how a student can go about doing so. The purpose and benefits of completing the program should be clear in any and all promotional content related to the program.

Start with recruitment

UVic's Pre-Arrival Program is not mandatory; it's completely up to the student as to whether or not they want to complete any or all of the program. So while we don't tell students they have to do they program, we do try and talk about the program in a way that implies this is just a thing you do as a new student. It's not a thing you "should do" or a thing you "could do"; it's simply a thing that new students do. Our ultimate goal is that our new students have the same inherent desire to complete our Pre-Arrival Program that they do to attend any face-to-face orientation program. For us, our approach of "expecting" students to complete the Pre-Arrival Program starts with recruitment. When we first launched the program, all of UVic's recruiters were briefed on the program's goals, benefits, topics, approaches, and any other information we had. This meant that in conversations with students, they were able to talk about the program as a way UVic supports their students. The Pre-Arrival Program was added to any next steps checklists that existed: Pay your deposit, register for courses, complete the Pre-Arrival Program. At our major on-campus recruitment event in May, all students received a promotional card about the program in their welcome package, and we were also present at the resource fair to talk up the program and answer questions. Our recruiters also took our promotional cards on the road with them when they visited schools throughout April, May and June. By talking about the program from the beginning of a student's interactions with UVic through to their first day of class, we are hoping to build a culture where completing the Pre-Arrival Program is just seen as a part of being a UVic student.

Have a web presence

Your online orientation program should have a web presence- one that is accessible to the public. Even if you are linking directly to the program inside your learning management system in all of your marketing and communications, you should still create a webpage that introduces the program, outlines its goals, gives an overview of the contents, provides instructions for how to access the program, and promotes any incentives. Early in your marketing strategy, I would recommend that you link people to this page, rather than the program itself. This webpage gives students a chance to learn more about the program before committing to starting it, and also gives an opportunity for family members to learn about the program (and then prod their students into completing!). A webpage makes your program searchable on the internet, and if the page is part of an orientation website, or in proximity to other information for new students, acts as another promotional method for the program. Don't believe me that a webpage is useful? Between July 1 and Sept. 30, 2020, our Pre-Arrival Program webpage had 11,304 views (9037 of them unique views), and people spent an average of three minutes and 28 seconds on the page. We only have around 4500 new students every year. People are accessing the webpage, and they are actually reading the content!

- View UVic's Pre-Arrival Program web page

Provide repeated outreach

If you want your online orientation program to be successful, you're going to need to develop a comprehensive and strategic communications plan. Telling your students about the program once or twice isn't going to be enough. Your communications plan should include repeated outreach, a variety of outreach strategies,

and variation in the messages contained with each outreach attempt. For the last two years, we have promoted the program at recruitment events, emailed students when the program launched, talked about the program via our biweekly email series, sent targeted follow up and reminder emails, and talked about the program via Instagram Stories every week. We also sent our faculty partners promotional materials for the program so that they could share via their social media accounts, any emails that they were sending, and any events they were hosting. Promoting online orientation programs through call campaigns or direct mailings are also options.

Inform the campus community

The more people on campus who know about your online orientation program, the higher the chance that other staff members will talk about the program with students and encourage them to participate. Students typically interact with lots of different departments prior to starting, including the Registrar, financial aid, academic advising, residence, international student services, and more. These departments are often answering student questions and helping reduce nerves, so it would be a logical extension of their conversations to encourage students to complete an online orientation to learn more about a specific topic, or just about the institution in general. We created a one-page overview of the program that we were able to share with campus partners, offered digital and paper-based promotional materials, presented to several different units so they could better understand the program, and also informed the university community via listservs and newsletters.
Pre-Arrival Program Info Sheet 2020

Provide an incentive

While telling students about the program, and talking about how much they could benefit from it will get some students to complete it, other students will need a bit of an extra push. If you want a strategy that will practically guarantee an increase in your completion rates, contests and incentives are the way to go. Incentives provide students with an extrinsic motivation to complete the program, and they are also attention grabbing, and draw people to learn about the program in the first place. You might offer a giveaway to every student who completes a certain topic or the entire program, or offer a contest where students must complete a topic or the entire program to be entered. In the past, we have offered students the chance to win a $200 bookstore giftcard if they completed the entire program, and then have also offered a chance to win a themed prize pack if they completed topics by certain dates throughout the pre-arrival period. Our intent in staggering the dates was to encourage students not to wait until the end of the summer to complete the entire program.

- 4 considerations for incentivizing completion

Follow up and reminders

After dedicating so much time to your marketing and promotion strategy and implementing the above six strategies, it's important not to drop the ball just before the finish line. Sending follow up and reminder emails to students who have started the program, but not yet completed, is critical. Not only does this strategy provide yet another nudge to students to complete the program, but it also acts as a way to identify any students who thought they had completed the program, but are actually still missing something.

- How to write more effective reminder emails

As student affairs professionals, we often don't think of ourselves as marketers. However, if we want students to engage with and benefit from our programming, we need to wear that hat sometimes. It may feel like a lot of work, but it's a lot of work with a large pay off... and it makes all your other work worth it!

How to write more effective reminder emails

No matter how good your marketing is, and how many incentives you offer, you're likely going to want to send students personalized reminder emails to help get them across the finish line to completion. For the last two years, we've sent emails the week before the first day of classes to students who have interacted with the program in some way, but not yet completed all activities. To some students, these emails act as a nudge towards completion; to other students, it alerts them to the fact that while they may have thought they completed everything, but in fact have not!

Designing these follow up and reminder emails based on Keller's ARCS theory of motivation can improve their effectiveness at eliciting the desired behaviour: Getting students to return to the program and complete it. When writing these emails, you should think about the reasons why a student may not have completed the program, analyze their motivational requirements, and then write a message that pertains specifically to those identified needs and requirements. Here are a few suggestions:

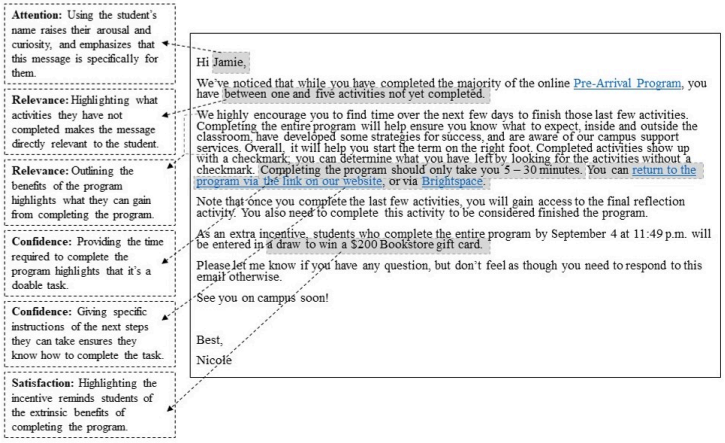
- **Attention.** Address the email specifically to the individual student (hello, mail merge!). This captures their attention and curiosity, and leads them to believe the message is specifically for them, even if you sent the same message to dozens of other students. A personal message always carries more weight than a generic one.

- **Relevance.** Remind the student of how they can benefit from completing the program. The more specific you can make this to their particular situation, the better. List the parts of the program they have not yet completed, and remind them how those parts specifically can benefit them. If you are able to

refer to responses that the student gave you in the program as reasons why they should complete the remaining activities, take advantage of the opportunity! For example, if a student indicated in a pre-assessment that they wanted to learn about getting involved on campus, but they haven't yet completed the involvement module, remind them of that!

- **Confidence.** Make the student feel like completing the remaining parts of the program is doable! Remind them of how much they've done so far, and provide them with an estimate of how long completing the rest of the program will take. For students who still have a large portion of the program left, present the time commitment in a way that seems reasonable to someone who is busy. For example, if someone has an estimated two hours of work left on the program, compare that to watching one movie or two episodes of the Crown, or present it as four 30-minute time slots.

- **Satisfaction.** Some students may be resistant to completing the program because it feels like work, like another task on the to-do list. If you have student feedback talking about how the program was fun, engaging, informative, etc., use it in your email to try and reduce a student's resistance to doing work! Additionally, while it's important to remind them of the inherent benefits of completing the program, you should also remind them of any external benefits, such as certificates of completion, contest entries, etc.



Example of a reminder email, highlighting the use of the ARCS theory of motivation

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4 considerations for incentivizing completion

While it's nice to think that all students will jump at the chance to complete an online orientation program and be better prepared to start at your institution, I think we all know that's just not true. Incentivizing course participation can be an effective strategy to increase completion; when we surveyed students during the pilot of the Pre-Arrival Program, a large percentage of students indicated that the contest associated with the program was at least part of the reason why they completed the program. Incentives attract student's attention, draw them into the program, and create a source of extrinsic motivation.

Depending on your institution, your budget, and the buy-in from your campus, incentives could vary widely. An incentive could look like providing a giveaway that a student will receive upon completing a section of the program or the program in its entirety, or it could be offering a student a chance to win a contest prize based on program completion. There are a few factors to consider when implementing an incentive:

- **The incentive must align with the amount of work required.** Offering a chance to win a $10 gift card in exchange for spending four hours completing an online orientation program, for example, will likely not be effective.

- **Incentives of higher value are more effective.** This probably isn't a grand revelation for you, but if you offer a $500 gift card as opposed to a $100 gift card, your completion rate will likely be higher. For our initial launch of our program with January-start students, we offered a chance to win a $500 tuition credit to everyone who completed the program, and had a 27% completion rate. The following year, as the result of a few

barriers put in place by our legal department, our incentive was a $200 giftcard to the campus bookstore; our completion rate was closer to 10%. While there were a few other factors at play here as well (most notably, that more content was added to the program), the change in incentive certainly didn't help. Offering more chances to win doesn't seem to have much of an effect on completion, so you may be better off offering one prize of larger value, rather than multiple prizes of a lesser value.

- **Align your incentive with what students value.** This may differ between student populations, but what are your students most interested in receiving for free? A gift card to the campus bookstore? An Amazon giftcard? A prize pack with pre-selected items? A laptop? If you can figure out what your students value most, your incentive will be more effective. We currently have a hunch that offering tuition dollars rather than bookstore dollars is more effective, even if the student saves the same amount of money at the end of the day; the cost of tuition can weigh heavily on a student, so any reduction in that amount is welcome! Other hunches: Offering a discount is not a great incentive, unless it's for something that they have to purchase, as that actually puts an added burden on them to spend money; Offering items, such as a laptop, iPad, or headphones is a lesser incentive, because if a student already owns those items, the incentive is lost.

- **Students love automatic grade increases.** If you can strike some sort of deal with first-year instructors on your campus to provide bonus points for students who complete your online orientation program, you've likely struck incentive gold. In 2017, Western's Faculty of Health Sciences switched the incentive for their online orientation program from a chance to win a $250 gift card to an automatic two-percent grade increase in a specific first-year course. The percentage of

students who completed the program quadrupled, going from 8% to 34% of invited participants. Notably, while offering a direct grade increase works as an incentive, promising students better grades due to the knowledge and skills gained by completing the program does not have the same impact. If you are choosing to go this route, make sure to think through how you will verify completion with instructors, and whether a student can receive bonus points in more than one course.

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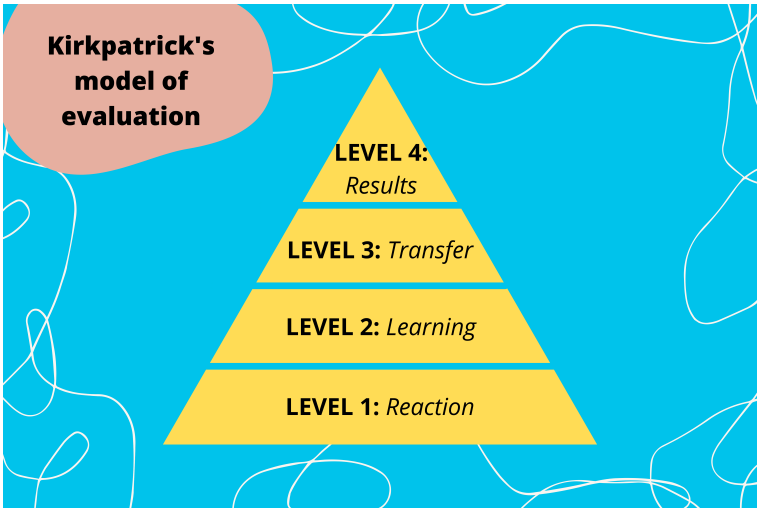
A simple model for assessing your online orientation program



If we're going to dedicate time and energy to creating and maintaining an online orientation program, we're going to want to have some kind of evidence that the program is having a positive effect on students. Kirkpatrick's model of evaluation offers an effective way to think through how you want to assess and evaluate your program. Kirkpatrick's model is a popular approach to evaluating training programs, and offers four different levels of evaluation:

- Level 1: Reaction
- Level 2: Learning
- Level 3: Behaviour
- Level 4: Results

Your assessment and evaluation strategy may encompass all four levels, or just one, so you should decide at the beginning of the project which levels you're interested in evaluating. As you move from levels 1 through 4, evaluation techniques become increasingly complex, data becomes harder to collect, and it's more difficult to be certain that the findings of the evaluation are attributable to the training course, and not confounded by other variables. Across most organizations, evaluation at the lower levels of the model happens more frequently than evaluation at the higher levels, and this generally holds true for our work in student affairs as well.

Kirkpatrick's model of evaluation

Level 1: Reaction

The first level of Kirkpatrick's model measures students' reactions to the course, looking at how they feel about the content, delivery method and, if applicable, instructor, and their overall satisfaction. Essentially, in this level, you are trying to answer the question, *Did they like the program*?

Level 1 evaluation is typically done via surveys, although can also be done via focus groups or individual interviews. In UVic's Pre-Arrival Program, we included an evaluation at the end of the program that asked students how helpful they found each topic (on a 4-point scale), how helpful they found the program overall, and gave them space to tell us their favourite part, and what they thought could be improved. Students had to submit this evaluation to complete the program.

We also sent a follow up survey 3-4 weeks into the term. This survey repeats the same questions that the end-of-program survey had, asking students to re-evaluate how helpful they think the Pre-Arrival Program was, now that they have actually experienced

university life. This survey is sent to all new students, which allows us to get feedback from students who completed the entire program, completed only parts of the program, and who did not access the program at all.

Level 2: Learning

The second level of Kirkpatrick's model evaluates what the student has learned, and is measured by changes in their abilities, including knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Essentially, this level asks, *Did they meet our learning outcomes*?

Level 2 evaluation is often done using a pre-post test, or using a comparison group. In UVic's Pre-Arrival Program, we chose to use a pre-post test. Before a student can access the 8 different topics within the program, they must complete a pre-test, where they are asked to evaluate, on a 4-point scale, how prepared they feel to _____. They are asked one question that corresponds to each of the program's overarching goals, and one question related to each of the 8 topics included in the program. Once a student has completed all 8 topics, they gain access to the post-test, where they are again asked to evaluate how prepared they feel to _____. While this method does mean we are relying on self-reported learning, it allows us to determine whether there have been any shifts in their perceived preparedness to start at UVic as a result of completing the program.

Often, online orientation programs might try to evaluate learning through end-of-module quizzes. However, while these quizzes can confirm that a student knows the information we want them to, it does not necessarily mean they learned it through the program, as we don't know what their prior knowledge was. Additionally, I have often found that these quizzes are passable even without engaging with the content; the quiz questions are often multiple-choice, and

the correct answer can be intuitive or easily guessable based on the options provided. Be strategic with this option!

Level 3: Transfer

The third level of Kirkpatrick's model measures changes in a student's behaviour after they have completed the training, attempting to determine if they are applying what they learned to their everyday lives. Essentially, this level asks, *Did they implement the things they learned*?

Level 3 evaluation can be more difficult to carry out, as it involves observing behaviour. Are students using the study strategies you recommended? Are they making the correct decisions when it comes to situations that involve academic integrity? Are they accessing the resources and services you introduced? We obviously can't follow our students around to make these determinations, so we need to look to either self-reported information or institutional data. Neither of these strategies is perfect, but they can help us understand what is not working within our program.

With UVic's Pre-Arrival Program, we don't evaluate too thoroughly at level 3, but we do make an attempt. Within the program, students are required to complete *a Think Forward* activity at the end of each topic. These activities ask students to apply what they have learned, and set goals and intentions for the term (i.e. choose 3 study strategies from a list that they would like to try; set 2 health and wellness goals, etc.). In our follow up survey, sent 3-4 weeks into the term, we ask students whether they have followed through on their intentions. It's not a perfect evaluation metric (especially since answer the question requires them to remember the intentions that they set), but it does give interesting data!

Level 4: Results

The fourth level of Kirkpatrick's model looks at the impact that the training program has on business outcomes, or in the case of an online orientation program, institutional metrics, such as retention and grade point average (GPA). Essentially, this level asks *Did the program have an impact on the metrics that matter most?*

In some ways, level 4 evaluation is not that difficult to carry out. You simply need access to institutional data to be able to see how the students who completed the program performed. The difficulty comes in ensuring that the result you found is actually a result of your program, and not a myriad of other factors. At first glance, comparing the GPAs or retention rates of students who completed the program with those who did not might indicate that completing the program was helpful. However, it's also possible that the students who completed were more likely to succeed in the first place, or maybe many of them also participated in a different intervention that helped them be more successful.

Evaluating the program at level 4 helps you ensure that your program is addressing the right problems. Maybe a goal of your program was to help students get better grades, so you taught students a number of different study strategies. Level 3 evaluation will help you understand if they implemented those strategies, but level 4 will show you whether implementing those strategies actually helped students do better in their classes. If they don't, you may need to revise your program!

Adding one more metric

This isn't covered in Kirkpatrick's model, but with an online orientation program, there's one more metric that's important to

measure: completion rates. I like to call this level 0. The question asked at this level is very simple: *Did students complete the program?*

Most learning management systems, if set up properly, can track completion at an activity level, a topic level, and at the program level. Tracking completion allows you to intuit student's reactions to the course to some degree before you even get to level 1. If students aren't completing the course, or are skipping one topic at a higher rate than others, then something likely needs to change. Comparing completion rates between different groups of students (i.e. by gender, by faculty, by admit status, by citizenship, etc.) can also be useful.

Assessment and evaluation is not necessarily quick and easy, but it can help you ensure your programs are useful, making an impact, and appreciated by your students!

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10 lessons learned from our first launch

Launching a new program is always a learning experience, and launching UVic's Pre-Arrival Program was no different. Reading through the feedback in our end-of-program survey really highlighted what mattered to students, what we had gotten right, and where we had missed the mark.

As a preface before sharing what we learned- don't judge me! Some of these lessons may seem like common sense when you read them, but as I say (in my head) to students who comment that portions of the program were common sense… common sense is only common once you know it.

1. If they need to know it pre-arrival, include it in the program

When we initially built the Pre-Arrival Program, we were trying to fill gaps that existed in our orientation programming. This meant that in some cases, if a resource already existed for new students that covered a topic, we didn't feel the need to include it in the program. Turns out, this was the wrong approach. If we are telling students that this program will prepare them to start at the institution, is should contain everything we expect them to know to do so. Sure, things like how to pay tuition, set up your technology systems, and more might be covered in various places on your institution's website, but if they're important for a new student, they should also be covered in the online orientation program, even if you're just pointing people to the existing resources.

2. They always want less text

Our program didn't even have that many text-based activities, and still, students commented that they wanted less text. Reading feels like doing work, and students don't want to feel like an online orientation is work. We had thought we had done a pretty good job of keeping text short and to the point, but it still wasn't enough for some of our students!

3. They love hearing from current students

Our new students loved the videos, profiles, and tips from current students- so much so that they wanted more. I'm convinced that the program could have been 100% student stories, and they would have had no complaints. Current students are able to share the most authentic representations of what post-secondary life is really like, and all new students really want is the inside scoop.

4. They LOVE games

Surprise! For a lot of students, their favourite parts were the activities where they didn't feel like they were learning, but were just having fun. Students seemed to appreciate all of our interactive activities, but the ones that were straight up games were mentioned the most. This included our *Jeopardy* game, which was intended to help students learn and think about new responsibilities they might be taking on during this transition to 'adult' life (i.e. cooking, cleaning, laundry, finances, medical appointments, etc.), and our *Guess the Cost* game, a rip-off of *The Price is Right* that had students playing games to determine how well they knew the cost of everyday items they would need to be

purchasing.

5. Most students are worrying and wondering about the same few things.

While students commented on content from all areas of the program, as I continued to read comments it became quite clear what students are wondering and worrying about the most. They're thinking about academics, and wondering what a 'day in the life' of a university student looks like. They want to know more about student life. They have a million questions about living in residence- a topic we didn't even talk about at all. Moving is a nerve-wracking activity, living on your own for the first time can be anxiety inducing, and they want to know more about this major change in their lives. Finally, they want to learn more about campus, and how to get around. This was a topic we initially left out of our online orientation, with the thought that they get this information in spades during our in-person programming, but feedback during our pilot changed that thinking real fast!

6. Inclusion matters

We obviously knew that inclusion mattered when we were creating the program, but the feedback we received really drove home just how much of an impact it could have for a student. We were very intentional when selecting students for our videos to ensure that, across all videos, diversity was represented. We were also very intentional when choosing the characters inside our interactive activities. I don't even want to admit how much time we spent debating and deciding on the characters, but it was important to us that we showcased a variety of genders, religious backgrounds,

abilities, ethnicities, and more, and that no character was represented in a way that might perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Hearing from a student that a specific character that we choose made them feel seen by the institution made all the time we put into these decisions worth it.

7. Make it shorter

We estimated our program would take students 3 – 4 hours, and most students seem to be on the lower end of that spectrum. They still wanted it to be shorter. I don't know how short the program would have to be before we would stop getting comments about time, but it's definitely an important factor to keep in mind when designing content. While you need to make sure you're including everything that's important, you also need to keep in mind that the longer the program is, the less likely it is that students will make it to the end.

8. They wanted more targeted content

This learning wasn't exactly a surprise to us, but it was good to hear it straight from the students. While we initially built one program for "everyone" (we only had so much time!), the reality was that the target audience that we had in mind was first-year students coming straight from high school. Transfer students and mature student told us that some of the content wasn't relevant, international students told us that would have liked content directed specifically at them, and some students even asked for content related to their program or faculty.

9. Students generally complete from top to bottom

We created our program so that students could access any content they wanted, at any time. While we recommended that they complete the activities within a topic in order, there were no restrictions put in place to force them to do so. Despite giving them the option to pick and choose, and jump around, the majority of students started at the beginning, and went through all the program's content in order. Even students who skipped a specific topic still seemed to complete the rest of the content in order. Since not all students make it to the end of the program, this really highlighted for us how important our decisions around the order of the content really were.

10. Your online orientation really demonstrates your institution's values

We talk about UVic's community values explicitly within the Pre-Arrival Program, but every decision made about the program is also an implicit demonstration of those values. Multiple students commented that they appreciated that we had talked about mental health and sexualized violence within the program, and we also had students comment that the existence of the program itself, and all the thought and care that seemed to go into creating it, demonstrated that UVic really did care about its students and their success. *Awwww.*

An introduction to digital accessibility

Portions of this post were originally co-written by Joanna Lake as part of an EDCI 565 project

Before you even start thinking about what type of content you want to be creating in your online orientation program, it's important to ensure you have a basic understanding of digital accessibility. While most orientation professionals are familiar with accessibility best practices for in-person events (using microphones, ensuring the font size on presentations is large enough for the room, confirming that venues are wheelchair accessible, etc.), many of us are less familiar with digital accessibility. We rarely see how others interact with digital content, so it can be difficult to know what barriers people may encounter simply through observation.
Creating an educational experience online that is accessible to all starts with understanding digital accessibility, recognizing the barriers to content that some students may face, and implementing techniques and strategies to reduce those barriers for all. This post will introduce you to the concept of digital accessibility, and outline a few basic principles to always keep in mind. In part 2, we will discuss specific techniques and requirements to ensure different types of content are accessible.

What is digital accessibility?

For our purposes, digital accessibility means that all learners have the same opportunities to access digital resources, interact with digital materials, engage in digital activities, and create digital content, regardless of disability. Although digital accessibility is an

essential requirement for those with disabilities, providing accessible digital content benefits all learners. Digital accessibility ensures that all resources and materials shared digitally are easily accessible for all. It means that everyone can perceive, understand, navigate, interact with and contribute to digital resources and spaces. Digital resources and materials may include documents, presentations, PDFs, videos, podcasts, websites, online images, social media materials, interactive activities, and more. While you may hear many people talk about web accessibility, I've chosen the term digital accessibility here to include both web accessibility, and the accessibility of content accessed using a digital device that does not require the internet, such as documents, presentations and PDFs.

- What is web accessibility in 60 seconds (video)

The POUR principles

In order to understand how to create accessible content, it can be helpful to understand the basic principle of accessibility. The four main guiding principles of accessibility tell us that content should be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust (POUR).

Perceivable

All digital content needs to be perceivable by everyone. People accessing your content needs to be able to input the information into their brain so that they can process it. While that sounds simple, it's important to remember that what is perceivable by one person may not be perceivable to someone else. Text, images, visual cues, and colour may not be perceivable by someone with no

vision, limited vision, or colour-blindness. Audio, such as podcasts, video, and voice messages, may not be perceivable by folks who are deaf or hard of hearing. Often, content must be transformed from one form to another in order to be perceivable by everyone (i.e. creating a text transcript of a podcast, or adding captions to a video).

Operable

Everyone needs to be able to operate and navigate through your content (whether it be a website, video, etc.). While most digital content is built to be operated with a standard keyboard and mouse, that's not how everyone accesses digital content. A computer mouse is often not helpful to someone with a visual impairment (you need to be able to see to know where to click), or to someone with insufficient fine motor control. It's important that all content can be accessed using a keyboard and other assistive technology, that the structure of the content is created using semantic markup, and that users have control over their experience (i.e. have an unlimited time to complete tasks, where possible; be able to play, rewind, or fast-forward video content, etc.).

Understandable

If people can't understand the language used in your content, or can't understand how to navigate and interact with your content, then it's not going to be very accessible. When creating digital content, especially content that is going to be viewed by a wide audience, it's best to use simple and concise language. Navigation should be created in a way that is simple, intuitive, and consistent

throughout. Instructions should be provided when applicable and interactive elements should be clearly labelled.

Robust

In today's world, people access digital content using a wide variety of operating systems, browsers, and devices. Content that is built to be robust will work no matter which technologies people choose to use.

Outside platforms

If you are working with any outside platforms, content creation software, etc., it's important to review the accessibility of those pieces prior before getting to work. Before purchasing any product, be sure to ask questions about the accessibility features of the product, and think twice if they aren't able to clearly and easily answer your questions.

Resources

If you're looking for more resources on creating accessible digital content, these websites and courses are a great place to start.

- World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (website): The W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) develops standards and support materials to help you understand and implement accessibility. The site provides an introduction to accessibility and basic accessibility principles,

and provides personal stories from persons with disabilities.

- Web content accessibility guidelines (website): The web content accessibility guidelines (WCAG) outline a shared standard for web accessibility and explain how to make web content more accessible to people with disabilities. The guidelines present both the principles of accessibility and techniques for accomplishing accessibility.
- Understanding the four principles of accessibility (website): This resource by WebAIM provides an introduction to the four principles of web accessibility: perceivable, operable, understandable and robust (POUR). Understanding these principles before diving into techniques can help an educator see the bigger picture.
- An Introduction to Accessibility and Inclusive Design (online course): This free, self-paced online course introduces some of the fundamental principles of accessibility, the major types of disabilities and assistive technologies, and the major principles that guide universal design and accessible content creation.
- Basics of Inclusive Design for Online Education (online course): This free, self-paced online course provides strategies to support educators in developing a course that is inclusive to students with a wide range of abilities, including students with disabilities.

The essentials of digital accessiblity

A version of this post was initially co-written with Joanna Lake for an EDCI 565 project

I learned a ton about digital accessibility throughout the process of designing UVic's Pre-Arrival Program, and one of the key lessons is that designing with accessibility in mind is much easier than having to retrofit or provide alternate materials later! So here are a few things to keep in mind.

Accessible text

Text is a common way that information is conveyed to students, whether it's through worksheets, notes on a subject, web pages or blog posts. Text-based content must be set up correctly in order to maximize its accessibility.

Headings

First and foremost, use headings to break up your text. This helps literally everybody. Headings allow people to quickly skim your content, understand the structure, and see how things connect. For people using screen readers, headings allow them to easily move from section to section.

- Headings must be created using the text styles and tags within your word processing software or the WYSIWYG editor of

your website or learning management system. Headings are **not** created by making text bold, capitalized, or underlined.
- Heading 1 is generally only used once in a document/post, and that's for the title (unless, or course, there is a specific text style or tag for the title).
- Don't skip heading levels. If your section header is heading two, then your sub-section should use heading three, and so on.

Hyperlinks

Hyperlinks are abundant in the digital world, and can be super helpful to provide students with additional content, or content in a different format. There are a few tips and tricks for creating accessible hyperlinks.

- The text of your hyperlink should be written in a way so that you can read only the hyperlinked text, and still understand what you'll find behind the link. Hyperlinking phrases like "click here" or "learn more" should be avoided.
- In general, don't hyperlink a full URL. Typically, they aren't fun to read and don't always provide a good indication of what you'll find. There are times when hyperlinking a full URL is valid, but use it sparingly.
- In general, don't set your hyperlinks to open in a new window or tab. They should be set to open in the window/tab you are currently in for several reasons:
    - Novice web users may not realize that a new tab has been opened, or might have difficulties switching between multiple open tabs. This difficulty is often enhanced when using a mobile phone.
    - For those who rely on assistive technologies like screen readers, links that open in new tabs can be disorienting and break up navigational flow for the user.

- For hyperlinks that link to non-HTML content, such as a link to a PDF, Word document, or PowerPoint presentation, indicate the content type within the hyperlink text. It can also be helpful to indicate that a hyperlink links to a video, if that is not already clear within the text.

Additional resources for accessible text

- How to structure headings for accessibility (external blog post)
- Accessible links and hypertext (external web page)
- Accessible hyperlinks (external web page)

Accessible images

Images can add a lot of value to digital content. Not only can they add visual interest, but they can also convey information and enhance comprehension for students. However, it's important to ensure that all students can gain value from the images you choose to use, including those with visual impairments. Whenever you are using images, make sure that they are high-quality. Test your images before including them in your resource to ensure that they will not become pixelated when enlarged.

Alt-text

All images used need to have alt-text that describes the photo. The alt-text will be read aloud by a screen-reader, and will also show up if the image is unable to load.

- Alt-text should describe the image in as much detail as required for a visually impaired person to achieve the goal of the image. Prioritize important details, and leave out any fluff that doesn't enhance the experience.
- Avoid using flowery language. Focus on describing the physical aspects of your image, and use plain language.
- Avoid starting your alt-text with "a picture of" or "an image of," as the audience will already be aware that it's a picture being described. I will, however, often start the alt-text of a graphic or a screenshot with "graphic of" or "screenshot of," as that adds additional information not already provided.
- Keep your alt text as short as possible. People generally don't need a novel!
- Use proper names when it's a well-known person, place, or thing, or if the proper name is part of the context of the overall content.
- Avoid using acronyms

Infographics

Infographics have become a popular way of conveying large amounts of information, but can be quite inaccessible to users with a visual impairment. The text written on an image, often called flattened text, cannot be read by a screen reader. It's almost impossible to write alt-text for an infographic that accurately captures all the information portrayed. The best approach would be to avoid infographics altogether, but if you feel you must use the format, consider breaking the information up into multiple smaller graphics instead of combining it in one large graphic (think presentation slides, or an Instagram carousel post). This way, alt-text can be written in smaller, bite sized pieces.

GIFs

GIFs have also exploded in popularity over the last few years, and can add some fun, flair, and attitude to your digital content. However, if not implemented with care, GIFs can be inaccessible, or event cause seizures and other responses for photosensitive individuals, such as those with epilepsy.

- All GIFs also require alt-text, and should follow the guidelines outlined above.
- Set GIFs to pause after five seconds. This allows students to experience the GIF, but eliminates constantly changing imagery. This helps photosensitive individuals, but also eliminates ongoing distractions for everyone!
- Avoid GIFs with lots of blinking and/or flashing lights and colours

Additional resources for accessible images

- Accessible images (web page)
- How to write better alt-text descriptions (blog post)

Accessible video

As video has both visual and auditory elements, it can present a number of accessibility barriers for students. Videos should always be captioned.

- If you're hosting your video on YouTube, the platform will automatically caption your video, which is incredibly convenient. However, they don't input punctuation, often don't

correctly capture names of places or people, and in general, are rarely 100% accurate. You will always need to edit the automatically generated captions.

- Make sure your captions line up with the timing of the audio. It can be very confusing and jarring if the captions are audio are out of sync if someone is choosing to refer to both.
- Make sure you caption all audio, not just dialogue. Other sounds that are relevant to the video should be noted in the caption as well, such as clapping or a ringing phone.
- Do not refer to things being shown on screen without explaining them. Avoid saying phrases like "as you can see here," as some of your audience may not be able to see what you are referring to, and will miss out on what you are trying to convey.
- Don't set a video to auto-play. People who use screen readers navigate content by listening, and sound playing while the page loads will interfere with the user experience. Autoplay can also be problematic for people interacting with your content in public spaces.
- In any text that introduces the video, it can be helpful to indicate the length of the video, so that those using a screen reader can know what to expect.

Additional resources for accessible video

- Captions part 1: Why captions are useful (video)
- Captions part 2: How to caption your videos on YouTube (video)
- Captions part 3: How to do captions right (video)
- The complete guide to video captions (blog post)
- Creating accessible videos (web page)

Accessible audio

Students who are deaf or hard of hearing, or students who are English language learners, may find audio content, such as podcasts, inaccessible. If you're creating content in an audio format, it's important to keep the following accessibility considerations in mind.

- Include a transcript along with the audio. This will allow students who are deaf or hard of hearing to access your content, and will also allow all students to skim the content, or use the search function, if they want to revisit a certain part of the podcast.
- Audio should be clear, set at a consistent volume, and have minimal to no unnecessary background noise.
- Audio should never be set to autoplay.

Accessibility and colour

We all like colour, because it makes things pretty. However, colour doesn't always make content accessible.

- When using colour, make sure the colour-contrast between the foreground and the background is high (i.e. between the text and the background). This doesn't just mean make sure that YOU can easily read the text; use a colour-contrast checker to double-check that everyone will be able to easily read the text.
- Colour can be very stimulating for those with sensory needs. While colour can certainly add value to content, be careful about overusing colour, or using too many different colours within the same piece of content.
- When using colour for interactive elements (like buttons), don't

rely solely on the colour to indicate it's an interactive element. Include alternative indicators such as underlining or asterisks.
- When creating graphs or diagrams, don't rely solely on colour to distinguish between data points. Change patterns, textures, and other elements as well.
- Avoid using red-on-green and green-on-red when creating content, as the two colours will be indistinguishable for those with red/green colourblindness (sorry, Christmas).

Additional resources about using colour

- Colour contrast and accessibility (web page)
- Colour contrast checker (web page)

Accessible interactions

When designing learning activities, it's likely that some of them are going to require interaction. You may have students answering multiple choice questions, selecting from a dropdown menu, drag-and-dropping to match different items or reorder items, and more. It's important that all of these interactions are accessible, which often means that you need to be able to complete the task using just a keyboard.

- Ensure that any interactive activity you create can be completed using just a keyboard. Not everyone has the dexterity to use a computer mouse, and people using screen readers navigate using their keyboard.
- Ensure that the clickable area is fairly large, and easily distinguishable from adjacent clickable areas. People with limited dexterity may struggle if the clickable area is small.

- Keep in mind that drag-and-drop style activities are often (although not always) inaccessible to folks using a screenreader. If you can come up with a different activity type, that's ideal. However, sometimes a drag-and-drop style activity best meets the learning outcomes. It's possible to create an alternative activity for folks using a screenreader; just make sure that you give the option for users to choose that activity **before** they begin to navigate the main activity.

Primary research about online orientation

Taking Orientation Online is full of information about online orientation programs, and all of it is based on published research, or my own experience with UVic's Pre-Arrival Program. However, sometimes you want to hear it straight from the source. While there isn't a ton of research about online orientation programs available (especially if you're interested in programs for students in on-campus, face-to-face programs), I've listed a few of the articles I've found useful below!

Development and evaluation of an online university readiness course furthered by capturing the lived experience of students during this transition: A multi-perspective understanding of the transition to university

Hanna-Benson, C. (2019). Doctoral dissertation, Western University

This doctoral dissertation describes the development and evaluation of *LegUp*, an online orientation program for new health sciences students at Western University. The dissertation describes the content of the program in depth, as well as the resources involved in creating the program and the impact of the program on students. Student who completed the program achieved higher grades and higher scores on the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) as compared to non-participants.

The impact of an online orientation program on student success at a community college

Colucci, R.L. & Grebing, R.E. (2020). *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention.* 27(1), Article 1

As the title indicates, the article describes the impact of an online orientation program on student success at a community college in the U.S. The study found a statistically significant different in fall-to-spring retention and first semester GPA for student who completed the program versus students who did not complete or did not access the program at all. The article provides very little details about the program itself.

Have you been oriented? An analysis of New Student Orientation and E-Orientation programs at U.S. Community Colleges

Chan, M. (2017). *College and University*, 92(2), 12-25.

This study provides an overview of online orientation programs (which they refer to as e-orientation programs) at U.S. community colleges. By conducting an overview analysis of 100 programs, and a detailed analysis of 20 programs, the author offers insights on subjects covered in online orientation and major design features critical to student learning.

Assessing an online student orientation: Impacts on retention, satisfaction, and student learning

Watts, J. (2019). *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 28(3), 254-270.

This study looks at a course-embedded online orientation

program that was created for students in an online master's degree in technical and professional communication. The program was structured by the community of inquiry theory of online learning, and had a goal of helping students learn how to learn online. The paper describes the program, and indicates that students were satisfied with their experience and used the knowledge gained.

Student engagement with an online orientation resource: How learning analytics refines educational design principles

Wozniak, H. (2013). *Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education*, 941-950.

This paper took a learning analytics approach to examine student engagement within an online orientation for undergraduate nursing students. The paper reports on findings related to which student demographics have a higher rate of engagement, which content areas are visited most frequently, timing of access, and association between engagement and grades.

Innovative orientation leads to improved success in online courses

Taylor, J.M., Dunn, M., Winn, S.K. (2015). *Online Learning*, 19(4).

This study evaluated the impact of including a 10-minute orientation module explaining basic course navigation instructions at the beginning of an online course. The orientation consisted of videos with voice-over, and contained interactive tools that allowed students to check their learning. The brief orientation was favorably received by students, and four of the five courses involved in the

study showed a reduction in the percentage of students who withdrew compared to the previous year.

Evaluating online learning orientation design with a readiness scale

Liu, J.C. (2019). *Online Learning Journal*, 23(4), 42-61

In this study, the author evaluated an online orientation program for online students using a student online learning readiness (SOLR) questionnaire. Students completed the questions both before and after participating in the online orientation program. Student readiness increased after completing the online orientation program.

Developing and implementing a mandatory online student orientation

K.R. Jones (2013). *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 17(1)

This paper discusses a mandatory online orientation for online students at a rural community college in the U.S. The program is briefly described, and evaluation results are shared. Students who completed the program reported that they felt better prepared, faculty reported that students seemed more prepared for the online environment, and retention in online courses improved.

Online student orientation in higher education: A developmental study

Cho, M-H. (2012). Educational Technology Research and Development. 60(6)

This paper describes the process of developing an online orientation program for online students. They walk you through the four phases of their process (analysis, design, development, and evaluation) explaining their program goals, structure, content and evaluation results along the way

Share your online orientation program with the world

UVic's Pre-Arrival Program is only one example of an online orientation program. Every institution with an online orientation has likely created their program with different goals, learning outcomes, structure, and learning activities. Across the country, some programs may be similar, while others will be drastically different. There are so many institutions and approaches to learn from!

Since most Canadian institutions have created their programs within their learning management system, and therefore behind an institutional log-in, it's very difficult to share our work with colleagues. The only way to share is through Zoom meetings and screensharing, or through written descriptions and explanations. We have so much to share with each other on the topic of online orientation, and I'd love to help facilitate that sharing!

If you want to write a blog post about your online orientation program, I'd be happy to share it on *Taking Orientation Online*. Your blog post could include any or all of the following:

- Describe your program in detail
- Share the key lessons you learned
- Walk us through the process of creating your program
- Talk about an activity or two that you really like from your program
- Discuss where you see your program going in the future
- Share how your program helped your institution accomplish its goals
- Anything you can think of!

Send me an email if you're interested!

UCalgary's online orientation journey

Written by Clare Hickie, Program Assistant, Student Engagement in the Leadership and Student Engagement office at the University of Calgary. Edited by: Gareth McVicar, Carllie Necker, Kelly Kay Spurlock, Clara Rofaeil

As the COVID-19 pandemic turned from days into weeks, and the prospect of a quick return to in-person activities dwindled, one question was at the forefront of our minds in spring 2020: *How are we going to facilitate new student orientation for thousands of students online for fall 2020?*

At the University of Calgary, we were lucky to have a head start through our Online Orientation program. Launched in August 2018, Online Orientation was envisioned as a complementary resource for students participating in Fall Orientation. As the event moved from a four-day to two-day event, this also provided another method to support students in their transition to university. Delivered through the institution's existing learning management software, D2L, all incoming UCalgary students were automatically enrolled. Created by a working group that included the Registrar's Office, Student Success Centre, Student Wellness Services, Students' Union, International Student Services and members of our own team in the Leadership and Student Engagement office, we divided the course into a series of seven themed modules that grouped similar content pieces together. These modules covered a range of topics from essential tasks like buying textbooks and paying student fees, to information on how to get involved in extracurriculars and succeed in classes, as well as tips on how to successfully transition to university life.

Creating a framework

After successfully delivering the program for two years, we decided to take a pause and re-evaluate the goals and delivery of the program. We decided to go back to the program roots and identified that we were missing a key element: *a guiding framework*.

We explored a number of potential options that centered on student transitions, learning and development with a focus on positive-growth mindset, and then we found an ideal fit in Dr. Laurie Schreiner's "*Thriving in Transitions*" model. In Schreiner's model, Thriving is composed of five main components: *engaged learning*, *academic determination*, *positive perspective*, *diverse citizenship*, and *social connectedness*. In turn, we created our own variation of the Thriving model, which included these five main components and added one novel category our team created: *effectively navigating change*. This sixth component captured what we felt to be vital skills for students to develop to transition into university, including everything from being able to successfully adjust to a new city (or even country) to skills we often call "adulting" like budgeting, cooking, creating a healthy routine, and many other important life tasks. Using this new framework, we explored areas we wanted to further expand course content. Some of the most notable areas we felt were vital to expand included those surrounding wellness, equity and diversity, experiential learning, and reflection and goal setting. Our original plan was to launch this new content in June 2021, however, then came the global pandemic.

Innovating in the virtual world

Despite the immediate demand to pivot our entire slate of programming into a virtual format, we were still able to significantly expand our Online Orientation content, update existing content,

to have consistent branding and more engaging elements like infographics. Some of our most significant changes included the creation of the *Student Rights and Responsibilities* module, which housed new content pieces on student conduct guidelines and resources, and the expansion of the academics-focused module *Getting Ready for Classes – How Can You Prepare?* to include a robust catalogue of campus resources and unique content items with academic tips and tricks. We also added a seventh module focusing on helping students new to Calgary adjust to life in university.

Into the academic year

Throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, we continued to develop and release new content for students through Online Orientation. Biweekly announcements and news items provided students with reminders of upcoming deadlines and important dates, as well as exciting programs and opportunities. At present, we are working with the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion to add new content that introduces students to EDI concepts. The development and expansion of our health and wellness module is also underway, using its own *mini-framework* based on Wellness in the 8 Dimensions model, to provide students with a holistic understanding of wellness and its importance in university life.

Lessons learned on staff support and student engagement

In going through the review process, we learned that the program requires the consistent support of a team of staff members to make it shine, and we needed more staff support throughout the year. In

January 2021, we were excited to welcome a co-op student in the role of First Year Experience Assistant to support the development of the program. Additionally, we found that student engagement via the trained peer leader-led discussion board was limited. We continue to look at creative ways to develop this aspect of the program. We identified that we needed more interactive content for students to engage with and utilizing technology such as H5P allowed for this, resulting in an increase in the time students spent in the modules and on content. Further, we plan to incorporate more reflective tools and helpful planning resources for students to utilize.

Next steps

As we begin to imagine what university life will look like when it is finally safe for students to return to campus, we have developed *Your First Year*, a first-year experience program that will add greater supports for incoming students through mentorship opportunities and targeted programming. Online Orientation will continue to play a vital role in supplementing our Fall Orientation. Its role has evolved from simply aiming to provide supplemental resources for students completing new student orientation, to become a year-long guide for students from the time they prepare to enter university the summer before their first year to the end of their first winter semester. For the incoming 2021 class, the schedule of content for Online Orientation modules will be organized in three phases: *Before You Arrive*, *Your First Year*, and *Second Year and Beyond* to help students make sense of what information they need at crucial times in their first year. The new normal has moved online, and we plan on making sure that incoming students can find a space with the support, resources, and connections they'll need to flourish during their degree.

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