

**Online Orientation at Maui
Community College
for
Distance Education Students
from
University of Hawaii at Hilo and
University of Hawaii West Oahu**

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Locus of Control

As Support Staff at the UH Center located at Maui Community College, I am assigned to be the liaison to students who are physically located on Maui but are attending UH Hilo's distance education Bachelor's and Master's programs. Additionally, there are a large number of UH West Oahu students also attending remotely (these students are assigned to a different Support Staff liaison, however) who also need a very similar orientation. Each semester there are new students joining these ranks. Every new student needs an orientation to the facilities available on Maui, both those physically located on MCC campus as well as those available online. They also need to be introduced to the expectations from the university they are attending as well. Coordinating a face-to-face meeting for students studying in an online environment has been unsuccessful, with less than 5% attending. However, the information still needs to be made available to them. Since they are (or will soon become) used to working in an online environment, an online orientation may be more successful in disseminating the information.

Initially, this will be offered to Distance Learning students, as they choose to use it (or not).

Also, one or more face-to-face orientations will be held in one of our computer labs to walk timid students through this process as well as facilitate networking for the new students. After this is implemented, continuing students will also be invited to these orientations to provide additional tutor/guides for new students also offering further networking.

Overall Description

An orientation website offers students a range of tools to help acquire the needed familiarization with expectations and resources as well as practical experience using a number of features offered by the course management system.

- The home page gives basic information as a list of links and contacts.
- An email link to reach the facilitator is provided for individual questions.
- The facilitator's Skype name is provided with a link to the free Skype download website. All students are encouraged to register with Skype and post their Skype name along with a photo and requested personal information to the Distance Education Student Registry course through the link or location provided.
- Some information is particular to UHWO and some to UHH, available in two similar narrated PowerPoint presentations.
- MCC campus resource information is pertinent to students from either campus, found in a third narrated PowerPoint presentation.
- A link to a discussion board provides a list of questions and answers/comments providing a continually updated reference.
- A link to a short quiz will verify the student has viewed the site.

Currently there is transition between course management systems, so the location of the DL Student Registry may be on WebCT, Moodle, Sakai or another product. For the purposes of this assignment, the information will be presented though WebCT, although my recommended management system would be Moodle as I am not familiar with Sakai. Moodle, however, is not available at the MCC campus.

Facilitator's Guide

Context: Currently, Moodle is not available on the MCC server, and WebCT is the course management system being used, however, there may be transfer to another product coming. Currently this could be offered (optionally) to all of our Distance Learning students. If my boss likes this concept, I would like to further develop this prototype, and discuss making it mandatory. I would recommend offering this orientation prior to the start of classes, beginning when the acceptance letters go out – while students are excited to begin and are willing/able to do the orientation lessons. I would like to offer several face-to-face orientation meetings where they go through the orientation in a computer lab with help as needed, starting in the late Spring, perhaps monthly, going up to the beginning of classes. (e.g. May-after graduation, July, August) Orientations may be scheduled at the Kihei satellite site as well.

Issues to be considered regarding implementation would be:

- Registration of all Distance Education students from each campus into the Distance Education Student Registry as a WebCT class. Acquiring and inputting the information.
- Including this class as part of each new student's registration process, and automatically registering them when they register for distance education classes through their respective campus. Acquiring and inputting the information.
- Maintenance of the discussion board Q&A
- Maintaining the DE Student Registry, so students are listed by their campus and program to facilitate networking. Deciding whether/how to include "undeclared major" students in the listing.
- Updating of list of students each semester, removing/hiding students not currently active from the DE Student Registry.
- Linking homepages with Student Registry. Also, providing a template for student homepages.
- Offering a modified version to prospective students for their use and exploration
- Offering some type of free prize for quiz completion, e.g. a logo pen from one of the bookstores, or with instructor buy-in, a few points of extra credit.

Implementation:

1. Students would log into the Distance Education Student Registry class completing the following sections. This orientation course has no completion date, allowing it to be an ongoing reference site with continually updated information. Students not currently active would be inactivated from accessing the course, their webpage would be hidden, and their name removed from the list by campus and major.

2. **Home page**

- Introduction
- Facilitator contact & office hours information
- Easy-access list of references

3. **Getting Started**

- UH Hilo Resources
- UH West Oahu Resources
- MCC Resources

Students are advised to view both the MCC and their university PowerPoint presentations.

4. **Continuing On**

- Skype registration directions and links to download the software
- Q & A discussion board
- Personal Web page creation
- Classmates listing by campus and major, linked to personal Web pages

5. **Finishing Up - Quiz**

- Orientation evaluation
- Brief quiz to verify the student has viewed the informational PowerPoint presentations, as well as completed the continuing activities.

Research:

"We have come to realize that the responsibility for learner success is shared between three major players: the student, the instructor, and the educational institution." (Major, 1999, p. 1) When a student enters college for the first time, it can be an overwhelming experience. Figuring it out, is the first major hurdle faced by a new student. Most campuses offer a new-student orientation to help them make a successful transition into college. Now with online instruction offering students the ability to attend their college remotely, provisions need to be made to assist these students as well, to make a successful college transition. Distance education students share many of the same needs for information as their campus-based counterparts, although some information is unique to their technology-based participation. While an orientation can't anticipate every question, there is a standard base of information pertinent to all new students. Having access to coursework through technology, suggests a need for an introduction and orientation utilizing the same medium. Whether campus-based or distance-based, a successful orientation will facilitate academic and social interactions, increase student involvement, enhance the sense of belonging to a virtual learning community, and help retention (Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996).

Internet-based learning has become the pre-eminent distance delivery, with its own set of advantages and challenges. A major strength of on-line courses is the collaboration available learner to learner as well as learner to instructor. (Hoffman, 2002; Major, 1999.) Unique to distance learners is the need to create an engaging virtual environment to facilitate this collaboration, as well as to build their self-confidence to promote collaboration. Additionally, providing practice sessions in a non-threatening environment prior to the beginning of the coursework is one of the recommended benchmarks for quality internet-based education (Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 2000). Understanding what type of students tends to choose online programs and why, helps define what to include in such an orientation.

Gaide (2004) states, "Students frequently come to the online environment with expectations, but without a clear understanding of what they should realistically expect from the online experience." An orientation program can provide guidance to understand the roll of the campus as well as the learner. Students need to develop a realistic expectation of the type of work that will be required. While online education is best suited to strongly independent learners with a high level of motivation, many students enroll in distance education courses not because it matches their learning style, but because it is convenient. Developing a learning-community support system is critical especially for these students, enabling them to share concerns and develop their ideas and skills in a low-stress, supportive environment enabling them to develop the necessary skills for success. Smith (1997) even posits that these new behaviors and skills developed in the virtual community may transit back to real-space, benefiting face-to-face interactions as well.

Goals for an effective orientation are (Barsun, 2001; Gaide, 2004; IHEP, 2000; Robinson, etal, 1996):

- Create a sense of welcome. Whether via a videotaped welcome or a face-to-face gathering, putting faces with the names of fellow students and faculty starts building the necessary network for successful interactions.
- Familiarize students with available campus resources. Both the local host campus, MCC, and the delivery campus, either UH Hilo or UH West Oahu, have resources available to all student, including distance education students.
- Introduce the classroom management system. Using a low-risk environment introduce students to the features and format of WebCT to develop some comfort with the technology prior to the pressure of a classroom situation. Students worried about the technology aspect (both instructor communication, and transmission of materials) will become frustrated and ultimately drop out. Defusing these concerns

are proactive for student retention.

- Raise the student's "comfort level." Many students have concern that they may not have access to the resources they will need due to their remote location. They may additionally harbor concerns whether online education will be of comparable quality to on-campus education. Student feedback has shown that the online student orientation can reduce students' threat level. The more comfortable students can become during orientation, the more likely it is that they will stay in the program.

One of the new tools students will be relying on during their education is computer-mediated conferencing (CMC). This may be synchronous, as with voice-over-internet and chat boards, or asynchronous as with email and discussion boards. As part of the WebCT introduction, asynchronous discussion board text messaging should be introduced, along with the synchronous tool Skype, which can provide both voice and text live-time conferencing. Providing students with various CMC tools has been shown to be effective in simulating in-person group discussions. Several advantages for asynchronous CMC should be pointed out. As it is predominantly text-based, it allows individuals to respond at different times, from different locations, and allows for reflection, review, and revision to posted comments. Studies have shown that students pay more attention to text communications and remember the information longer than if it were just spoken. While text messaging does not allow for the aural and visual cues which some believe to be a liability to its effectiveness, others feel that text messages allow for truly conveying their message and personality without the distraction of physical cues. (Barsun, 2001) Another aspect personally observed is what Smith (1997) refers to as its "astigmatic" nature. Participants are judged by the content of their communication rather than by any stigma (positive or negative markings or behaviors that locate an individual in a particular social status) such as age, appearance, body shape, gender, or race. CMC serves to reduce a student's feeling of isolation while creating a learning community. Collaboration between classmates and their instructor is expected and required, and a more uniform playing field made up of active learners is created.

Critics of distance education programs are quick to cite the statistic showing online education programs usually have significantly higher drop out rates than traditional classroom programs. The orientation program can be the first line of defense in combating the drop rate. Screening for computer skills and student readiness need to be part of the acceptance process, but once accepted into a program, the task is to ensure they have all tools necessary to see them through. The drop rate in any program cannot be equated with academic non-success. A number of factors contribute to this statistic, however most students who drop out cite requirements of school, work, and/or family life as preventing sufficient participation, not course or learning related issues. Thus in actuality, their decision to drop was actually a mature, well-informed decision rather than a lack of success. While circumstances in a student's life cannot be controlled, a thorough orientation can provide the beginning student with a realistic expectation for what will be coming and expectations of what they will be required to do. This won't prevent all drops in an online program any more than it would in a traditional face-to-face orientation, however, this advance familiarization may offer the new student important planning information. Fore-warned is fore-armed, as the saying goes.

Distance education programs are made up of a diverse group of learners, often located in different places, with different ability levels, different backgrounds, different levels of technology comfort, and different learning schedules. Their common ground is within a virtual community as they surmount the barriers of time and distance through the facilitation of distance education. By being aware of the needs for and barriers to success regarding distance education students, the orientation can help students surmount the possible barriers, providing the tools and support for continued success.

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Particulars:

- **Web-based Content:** Course information and instructions through WebCT.
(steps 2-5 in Implementation section)
- **Asynchronous:** Email (direct), discussion board (through WebCT), personal student Web pages (through WebCT)
- **Synchronous:** Skype voice-over-internet and Skype chat