

Virtual Online Orientation for a Graduate  
Nursing Program: A Process in Evolution

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## Abstract

**Background:** The College of Nursing (CON) at a particular university admits over 500 students to the online graduate nursing program over three semesters in one year. To overcome the logistics and expense of on-campus orientation, the CON transitioned to a mandatory online orientation using the university's learning management system.

**Methods:** Orientation was held through a course site which culminated in a live webinar experience. The course included content traditionally delivered during on campus orientation. During the webinar, faculty presented a coursework overview and allowed students feedback.

**Results:** Based on student feedback, changes were implemented to decrease limitations and weaknesses. Mandatory modules and quizzes were instituted in the course. Students received a webinar invitation after completing module content and earning 100% on quizzes.

**Conclusion:** The virtual orientation process resulted in decreased expenses and logistical concerns, increased student and faculty satisfaction and appropriate participation in the webinar.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the University of South Alabama College of Nursing's online orientation process developed for students enrolled in graduate and doctoral nursing programs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), in the fall of 2012, 29.8% of post-baccalaureate students were enrolled in education delivered completely in a distance format [1]. With nearly one-third of graduate students choosing distance learning platforms, nursing is rising to the challenge of on-line learning. Technology is an asset which allows students and faculty to stay in contact with one another on a basis that elicits support from both ends. In the online environment, students often feel disconnected from faculty due to the inherent distance that exists between the two entities [2]. The College of Nursing (CON) has attempted to bridge this gap with the use of multiple technologies. Campbell, Gibson, Hall, Richards & Callery (2008) describe favorable outcomes using technology in the postgraduate nursing student population in the online environment [3].

Because the CON offered graduate programs in a distance format, a discussion took place related to on-campus orientation. Graduate nursing students hailed from all regions of the country including Alaska and Hawaii. Two concerns regarding on-campus orientation for graduate nursing programs were identified. The first issue was logistical in nature. Students attended on-campus orientation during the first week of the semester when undergraduate students were beginning classes. The college of nursing had to coordinate classroom availability, faculty schedules, student parking, arrange lunches/snacks and campus tours. The second issue identified was related to costs. To overcome on-campus space related challenges, the CON moved orientation to a local hotel. Due to financial restraints, orientation was only held once in a hotel. Costs associated with orientation held at the hotel (meeting rooms, hospitality rooms, parking, shuttles, catering, etc.) were approximately \$3 - 4,000. This figure did not include faculty time, loss of productivity or distributed materials. While the costs on-campus was considerably less (approximately \$2,000 each semester) for the physical space, catering, shuttles, and materials, faculty costs remained the same. Moreover, students reported a financial burden associated with attending on-campus orientations. In 2013, the average daily rate of hotels in the United States was \$110.35 [4]. According to the Bureau of Transportation statistics (2015) the average cost of domestic flights in 2013 was \$382.04 and to a regional airport near the CON during the same time period was \$461.33 [5]. McDermott & Stephens (2010) report average daily fast-food costs of \$15.30 [6]. In 2013, the cost per day for car rental was \$41.76 [7]. Payscale.com (2015) reports the median salary for a registered nurse as \$26.00 per hour [8]. A four day three night trip to campus for orientation, not including fuel costs, childcare and other incidentals, could easily cost a student over \$1,000.00 for travel expenses and nearly the same amount in lost wages or consumption of vacation time.

Based on student and faculty feedback from on-campus orientations considering the aforementioned issues, a clear need was demonstrated to hold graduate orientation on-line.

The college formed a committee and three aims were developed for a virtual orientation. Aim one was to enhance student satisfaction surrounding the orientation process. Aim two was to deliver orientation in an online format without losing any of the on-campus orientation content. Aim three was to ensure student competence in the online environment prior to the first day of class.

## Materials and methods

### Process

The CON and the university as a whole transitioned from the eCollege Learning Management System (LMS) to the Sakai LMS beginning in 2012. Faculty members were learning a new LMS while simultaneously hosting nursing graduate orientations on-campus. Copious amounts of handouts and materials were disseminated during these on-campus events. One faculty member identified a function in the new LMS which allowed faculty to set-up a project site and invite participants to join. All of the materials were digitally transferred into that site for the incoming fall 2012 graduate students attending on-campus orientation. This was the birth of the virtual orientation at the CON. By spring of 2013, the decision was made to deliver graduate orientation in the online environment using a two part process. The first portion was delivered via the LMS asynchronously, allowing the students to complete content at their convenience. The second component was an all-day synchronous webinar which required students to watch and participate live in real time.

### Orientation Course

In order to meet the goal of transitioning graduate nursing orientation online, the LMS course used in the fall of 2012 to house orientation materials was repurposed and the incoming graduate students were added to the site. The orientation course was completely faculty driven; therefore, no registration or fee was required of the students. Students were given access to the course four weeks prior to the synchronous orientation webinar and three weeks before the start of the semester. Strategically, this afforded the students the opportunity to navigate the LMS prior to the start of classes.

**Course features:** The virtual orientation course was set up identically to other online class offerings. The site included an announcements section, home page, calendar, forums, lessons, syllabus, bookstore link, and a mail tool. Forums were particularly helpful for students as multiple categories were created for questions and answers that corresponded with the course content. There was also a “meet and greet” forum for students to post pictures and biographical data, interact, and create connections. Students were divided into groups based on their specialty area. Each specialty also had a dedicated forum which was monitored by the specialty coordinator.

**Course content:** The intent of posting content in the course was to duplicate the in-person experience. Specific presentations were pre-recorded and uploaded into the course. Some of the content areas included: registration instructions, academic standards, advising rules of the road, navigating online courses, online testing, scholarship opportunities, sub-specialties, scholarly writing, biomedical library tour, and a webinar overview. Other supporting materials and documents were also uploaded in the course. Students were required to view the content in this course prior to the synchronous webinar.

### Synchronous webinar

A synchronous webinar completed the orientation process. Students were advised to reserve a specific date to attend the mandatory all-day webinar event. If students did not complete the orientation and attend the webinar they were academically disenrolled. To host a synchronous webinar experience, there were many considerations. Multiple products were evaluated; however, the university had contracted with a particular product that was ultimately used for the synchronous webinar portion of the orientation. Direct technical support was challenging, because students were distance. It was imperative for the webinar product to be relatively user-friendly for both students and faculty. The webinar process occurred in three phases: (a) before the webinar, (b) during the webinar and (c) after the webinar.

**Before the webinar:** A key aspect to any technology that is used for a synchronous webinar is students’ access to technical support during the process. Student support needs required faculty involvement to ensure that potential issues were resolved prior to the webinar. Once students reviewed the content in the LMS orientation course, they received an e-mail link to register for the webinar. This allowed faculty to track student registration and follow-up with survey questions for outcome measures. The webinar tool also sent reminders to faculty and students whether they had registered or not, which was a beneficial feature for host faculty. Structured survey questions were developed when setting up the webinar and to evaluate the process at the conclusion of the webinar. Prior to registration, students were required to view content related to webinar navigation in the LMS course.

Faculty related technology biases have been well-documented [9]. To alleviate these fears, a practice webinar session was provided for faculty which allowed them the opportunity to practice host related skills. The practice sessions were also recorded for faculty review. The primary goal prior to orientation was to ensure that students and faculty were provided with the necessary registration and training to facilitate a smooth and seamless webinar experience.

**During the webinar:** Many hours were dedicated to ensuring the students were prepared for the synchronous webinar so students were comfortable navigating the product and understood expectations. Webinar days began early for faculty. Two computers, monitors, cameras, headsets and external speakers were set up in a conference room, which the presenting faculty used during the Webinar. Also, there were two faculty members and an IT staff member with full computer setups as described above who monitored and assisted with all aspects of the webinar. Presenting faculty members were assigned a designated time to present the information for their particular course. The faculty member was asked to arrive 15 minutes prior to his or her respective presentation. As the presenters arrived, they were seated at one of the two work stations set up in the room. Once the previous faculty member had concluded his or her presentation, the host activated the next presenter. A key feature that was beneficial during the webinar was the ability to control the computers from a central host workstation as previously described. The host had the ability to transfer control to any webinar participant. Presenters also had the ability to screen-share, enabling them to review their particular course within the LMS. According to student feedback, this reduced anxiety for the students as they attempted to navigate through each

particular course. And finally, an important function that was a faculty favorite was the ability for the students to ask questions. Song et al. (2004) have described a disconnect between the faculty and students in the online environment [2]. The ability for students to ask questions directly to the faculty member eased student anxiety and allowed for one-on-one communication that many students and faculty enjoyed. The “hands feature” is the tool that is used within the webinar to ask a question. Students were able to raise a virtual hand which alerted the presenting faculty. The presenter then called on the student and unmuted him or her to hear and answer the question live. The webinar dashboard contained many functions, primarily the students name, a hand feature and other items, which at times were used sparingly. A feature that many students enjoyed was the ability to chat within the webinar. Digital native students were well versed in texting so they were extremely comfortable using chat for questions. One difficulty with the chat feature for faculty was in many cases several students asked questions simultaneously which encompassed the question pane and caused some of the questions to disappear from the screen before the faculty member was able to answer. For this reason, another individual helped monitor and answer chat questions as needed. The dashboard was extremely user-friendly for both the faculty and students, which assisted in alleviating webinar-related anxiety.

**After the webinar:** Finally, upon completion of the webinar, a survey was emailed to the students who attended. The webinar tool enabled host faculty to generate the reports that included: results from polls that are setup prior to the webinar, responses from the chat, and the question and answer section of the webinar. The survey results were compiled and then distributed among the faculty who coordinated the orientation as well as the CON Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. Feedback has been invaluable; the orientation/webinar process has flourished due to the feedback received from the students. Each student was assured that the survey process was anonymous and that importance was placed on survey. The original webinar product that was used, administered the survey questions at the completion of the orientation after the students logged off, which may have diminished the overall return rate. The feedback mechanism in online learning has been described as a particular area of weakness [10]. The webinar product currently used administered the survey while the students were still logged into the webinar, which resulted in a higher student participation rate. The final phase of the process was to upload the recorded webinar into the LMS orientation course. Students have reported the recording extremely helpful. Many students review particular session topics at a later date. The initial recording was downloaded to a particular computer that was dedicated to the webinar exclusively; once the recording was complete the file was converted and uploaded into the LMS orientation course. This process was completed rather quickly after the end of orientation for student access.

## Results

### Costs

Costs overall were dramatically decreased by moving to an online orientation. Student expenses decreased by up to \$2,000.00 depending on geographic location and time missed from work. College of nursing related costs decreased from \$2-4,000.00 per occurrence to only faculty time. The college already had the IT and computer

infrastructure in place. The university purchased the license for the webinar tool so costs to the college of nursing were minimal. The expenditure was limited to faculty time to oversee the course site and webinar.

### Limitations

As busy professionals, graduate nursing students did not always complete or view the information provided in the LMS orientation course. This disparity sometimes created chaos on webinar day and dissatisfaction with the process. Students who were prepared voiced frustrations surrounding students who were not and that took time with process questions that were addressed in the orientation course. Other concerns surrounded technology failures especially with the afternoon portion of the webinar which focused on break-out sessions in specific tracks.

### Process Changes

In response to student and faculty feedback, the content in the orientation site was made mandatory. Quizzes were posted at the end of each section in which students were required to earn 100% and were able to repeat until that grade was achieved. After all content was complete at 100%, students were sent an invitation to the synchronous webinar. This change has been very positive and student participation has increased significantly.

As mentioned earlier, a new webinar product was contracted by the university. This new product has the same functionality as the original with the added ability to conduct anonymous surveys prior to the close of the webinar which has resulted in a 98% average completion rate. The new webinar product also allows the host to move students into breakout sessions without the participants logging into another product.

## Conclusion

Overall the virtual orientation/webinar process allowed the faculty and student the flexibility to perform the tasks and functions of a true face-to-face orientation without having to incur the cost of travel and other related expenses. The overall experience hinges on the initial setup and training of the students and faculty. The ability to alleviate the fear associated with technology is a key aspect and can make or break a virtual orientation. Many hours are spent prior to the orientation, but the reward of a smooth orientation is well worth the time invested.

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