

Online Learning Orientation: A Key to Success

Introduction

Online learning is a convenient and flexible way of pursuing higher education, but it also poses unique challenges and demands for students. To succeed in an online program, students need to develop the skills, strategies, and habits that are essential for online learning. However, not all online programs provide adequate orientation and support for students to prepare them for the online learning environment. Traditional asynchronous orientations in online programs often miss the mark, setting a tone of detachment rather than engagement. They can inadvertently send a message that the online educational journey is a solitary one, where students are expected to navigate the waters of their new academic environment alone. Without real-time interaction, the warmth of personal welcome is lost, and the excitement of embarking on a new educational chapter is dampened. These orientations can lack the human element that fosters community spirit and fails to mirror the collaborative and interactive essence of the learning experience that follows. In essence, they risk starting the student's journey with the echo of isolation rather than the buzz of connection. Additionally, they often focus more on the process and policy rather than helping students who are often returning to academia after considerable time away develop critical study habits, time management skills, and the proactive mindset that are crucial for academic achievement. This presentation will focus on the approach taken by our institution to address this critical step in the student journey.

Introduction to Learning Skills

Students embark on an innovative educational adventure with our unique “Introduction to Learning Skills” course, a gateway to the academic voyage ahead. This course is meticulously crafted to mirror the dynamic and challenging experiences that await throughout the program. It serves as a primer, acquainting students with the Learning Management System (LMS) and the diverse array of tasks they will encounter. To inspire active engagement, the course transcends the informal; it’s a pass/fail course that is included on students’ transcripts. As with all our courses, upon entry, students are greeted by a welcoming home page. This digital foyer not only guides them through the course with intuitive navigation but also introduces them to their academic champions – complete with photographs and contact details for both the teaching team and student support services. This is where the journey of discovery begins, setting the stage for success and a commitment to excellence in learning.

The Roadmap

The course syllabus, which serves as a comprehensive guide for students to navigate their learning journey, is reimagined in our courses as the “Start Here” module. This module presents the syllabus content in manageable segments, offering the same essential information in a more accessible format. Although the traditional syllabus is still available, this modular breakdown enhances students’ ability to easily absorb and reference critical course details. The “Start Here” module extends beyond the scope of mere course requirements, featuring a welcome video from the instructor and a “getting to know you” video discussion board that fosters a sense of connection, akin to the reception students would experience in an on-campus program. This element of the module enhances the relational aspect of the course, bridging the gap between

virtual and residential education environments. It also provides the first opportunity for students to practice one of the skills they will need as they engage in their program.

Ensuring Understanding

The first module redefines the introduction to course policies, transforming what could be a monotonous day of policy presentations into an engaging, self-paced learning experience.

Instead of struggling to retain a deluge of information, students can now explore these crucial topics in manageable portions, ensuring better comprehension and retention. At the conclusion of the module, a policies quiz serves several vital functions. It verifies students' understanding of the policies and expectations, offers a hands-on opportunity to navigate the LMS quiz system, and records their acknowledgment of key program policies. This proactive approach effectively eliminates the "I didn't realize that was a thing" excuse in the event of a policy infraction.

Learning about Learning

Throughout their educational journey, students accumulate a wealth of knowledge, yet rarely do they delve into the intricacies of their own learning processes. The course's second module is designed to bridge this gap. Engaging with the Kolb Learning Styles Inventory, students embark on a journey of self-discovery, unveiling their learning preferences and strategies to navigate the full spectrum of the learning cycle more effectively. The 16 Personalities assessment sheds light on their unique character traits, providing valuable perspectives on team dynamics. Meanwhile, the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory pinpoints specific areas for enhancement, paving the way for a tailored success strategy within the program. This module's assignments are dual-purpose: firstly, students submit their assessments via Canvas, which informs the creation of their inaugural learning teams. Secondly, they participate in a text-based discussion forum,

fostering a collaborative environment where they can exchange and reflect upon the insights gained from their assessments.

Thinking about Thinking!

In the course's third module, students delve into metacognition—pondering over their thought processes. This introspection, akin to learning about learning, is often a novel experience for them, as they contemplate their reasoning, assessment, and decision-making based on acquired information. Although critical thinking is frequently promoted as an educational objective, it's rare for academic programs to offer a tangible method for students to enhance this skill. Upon enrollment, our students are sent a welcome box that includes Paul & Elder's "The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking," which offers a systematic approach to developing this competency. During this module, students will explore different facets of thinking and engage in exercises to apply these concepts in analyzing articles. This marks the beginning of their journey in honing critical thinking and analytical abilities, further equipping them with essential skills for success in their academic pursuits.

Thinking about Time

In the final module of the course, students engage with the concept of time management—a vital skill, particularly for students who are also working professionals. Embarking on graduate studies while maintaining a full-time job requires careful juggling, and it's a challenge that demands serious attention. Through an interactive activity, students examine the various roles they play and conduct a detailed analysis of how they spend their time. This exercise often leads to a revelation about the actual number of free hours they have each week. Subsequently, they are introduced to several time management strategies, such as the Pomodoro Technique, Stephen Covey's Big Rocks principle, and the Eisenhower Matrix, all designed to aid in mastering their

schedules. The final task involves a reflective student success project, where they consolidate their self-discoveries from the course and devise a strategic plan to thrive in their academic journey.

Connecting the Dots

Students are registered for the course approximately 6 to 8 weeks before their initial term begins.

The course content is primarily asynchronous, yet it marks the start of their interaction with classmates and instructors. The instructor actively engages with the students by providing detailed feedback on assignments and participating in discussion forums. As the semester approaches, students will participate in live sessions with their faculty and peers, diverging slightly from the weekly meetings during the semester. These live sessions serve as an introduction to the virtual classroom environment and foster deeper connections among participants.

The inaugural live session is a welcome event featuring the Dean, program faculty, and staff. The first half includes introductions and insights into the program and courses. The latter part allows program staff to outline key expectations and address any student inquiries.

The second live session offers a chance for students to interact with current students. A student panel share their insights, offer advice, and field questions. In the second half, students meet their learning team. Pre-class meetings for these teams are crucial, especially since a group assignment is scheduled for the program's first week. Such pre-emptive meetings are even more significant in an online setting, where students may span different time zones, compared to the on-campus experience. Depending on the session's remaining time, this initial meeting may include guided discussions, a collaborative virtual escape room activity, or a blend of both, all designed to unite the team towards a shared objective.

Student Feedback

"It was a great opportunity to get to know a few members of my cohort"

"Dr. Healy's detailed presentations are essential preparation for business school. I wish I had something like this ages ago, when I entered undergraduate school"

"I have been out of school for several years since college ended, and it was nice to have the opportunity to explore my learning style and get re-introduced to positive study habits. This course also felt like a nice intro to the school overall, and it helped me get more comfortable with Canvas and the resources I have available to me. Finally, I really liked that I got to meet my cohort in this orientation course rather than in one of my other courses, and I enjoyed the panel from the prior year cohort".