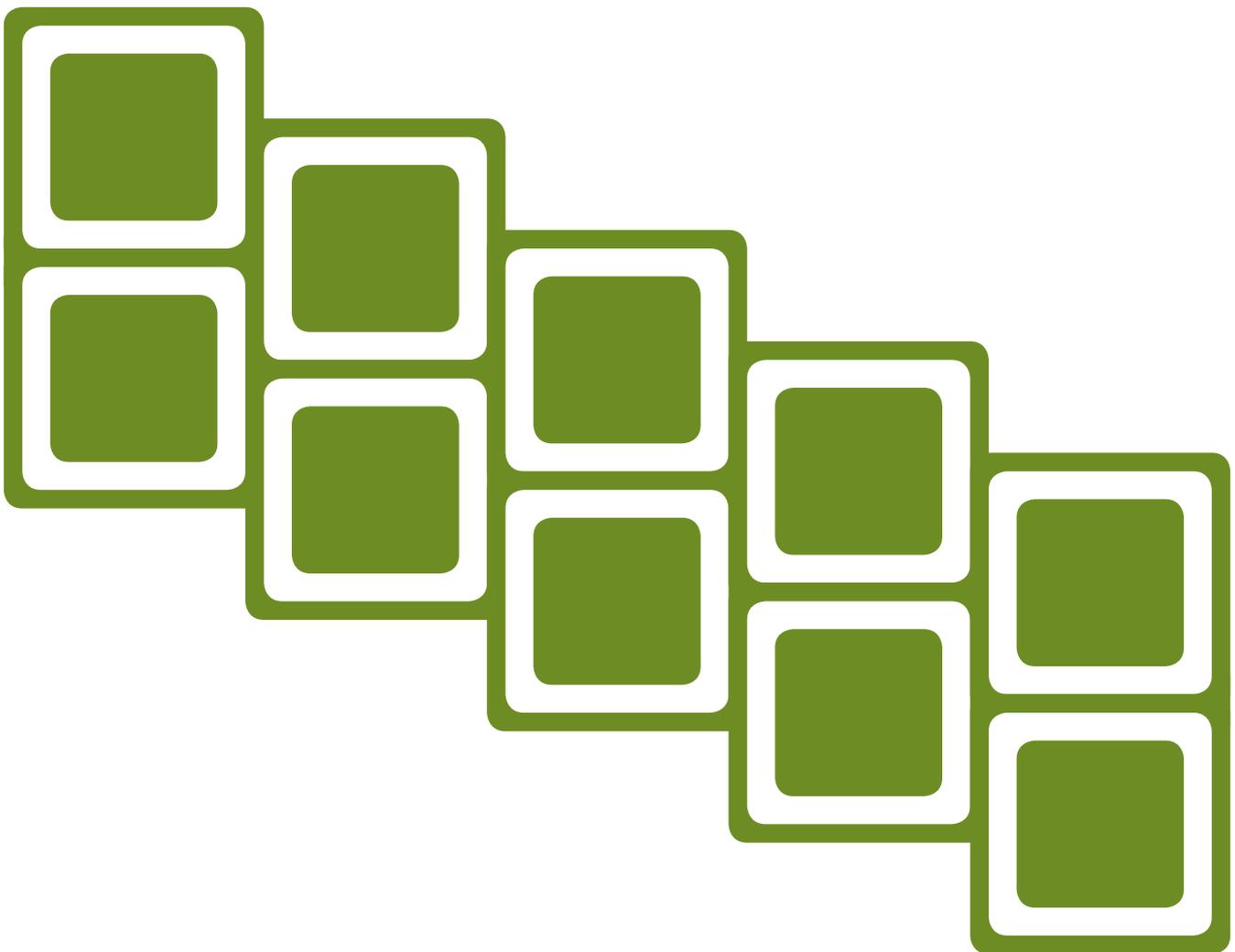


Summer Academe
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All Hands on Deck for Success: An Online Orientation Project

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Abstract

In spring 2015, a multidisciplinary team at the University of Wisconsin–Madison developed a unified, 4-part orientation project that was integrated into 15 undergraduate summer online courses. The team sought to create a newfound informational support structure for summer online students and integrate it with centralized learning technologies so that over the long term it could be scaled to serve a larger audience. This paper presents a description of the inception of the committee and the orientation pilot and its main components, describes the way they were deployed and evaluated, and lists key takeaways for administrators.

Summer Term at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW–Madison) is more than a self-supporting operation. It fully funds summer instructional expenses and supplements the institution's school and college budgets for the remaining academic year. Each summer approximately 13,000 students enroll in roughly 1,000 courses for a total of 54,000 credit hours.

As is the case with many of our peer institutions across the nation, enrollment in traditional face-to-face summer courses has remained static, while enrollment in online summer courses has grown markedly.¹ UW–Madison's total online summer enrollments were 1,564 in 2012 and 3,314 in 2015, growing by 112% in three years. Expecting this trend to continue, our Summer Term office, in collaboration with several campus units, led a campus-wide effort to develop faculty and student resources for online learning. In addition, the following key issues² facing summer session offices nationwide motivated our interest in growing our infrastructure for online education strategically and proactively:

- New modalities of instruction are one key to enrollment growth.
- Universities see summer sessions as a new source of revenue.

While the concept of developing an online orientation is not new (institutions with robust online programs likely have long had similar resources in place), the project highlighted in this paper involved a process of creating an online orientation in a centralized manner on a decentralized campus. The paper describes the inception of the committee and details the creation and deployment of the four main components of the orientation project. It also provides key takeaways for administrators who may be considering implementing something similar at their own institutions.

Origins of the Online Course Design Committee

UW–Madison has 13 schools and colleges, three major learning management systems (LMSs) for online courses, and at least four major units across campus that are devoted to instructional design, academic technology, and online course development. There is no single campus resource for instructors interested in converting face-to-face courses to online courses or developing new online courses. If an instructor is in a large school or college, they may have access to instructional design units within that school or college that can help develop their online course. If they are in a smaller school or college, have limited resources available (or are particularly technology savvy), they may choose to develop the online course on their own.

1 Based on benchmarking of institutions in the Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA), formerly the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC).

2 Based on benchmarking of institutions in the following professional associations: North American Association of Summer Sessions (NAASS), Association of University Summer Sessions (AUSS), and North Central Conference on Summer Sessions (NCCSS).

Due to the highly decentralized campus environment, faculty experiences in creating online courses and student experiences taking online courses vary from course to course and from year to year. This situation was the impetus for creating a cross-campus committee consisting of individuals from the major instructional design units and from other major service providers on campus.³

The Online Course Design Committee was created to develop an online course instructional design process that has a common set of design standards, nomenclature, and tools, so that the quality of the online course and faculty development experience are consistent across campus development units.

The committee identified the four deliverables:

1. Common design standards
2. Common instructional design kick-off process
3. Common scoping document to estimate work
4. Plan for infrastructure support

Origins of the Online Orientation Project

The Summer Term office provides central coordination of summer operations on campus and also sets aside special initiative funds to develop courses that meet a curricular need. In 2014, the Summer Term office created a two-part survey in order to learn more about the student experience in summer online courses. The first part, the pre-assessment, surveyed students' expectations and attitudes surrounding online learning before their summer semester began. The second part, the post-assessment, surveyed students' experiences after they completed their course.

Five themes emerged from the survey data and informed our decision-making process for creating an orientation tool that would help level-set student expectations—that is, establish a consistent understanding— around the following themes.

Time management: Level-set student expectations around balancing summer activities (such as internships and vacations) with their summer course load and the amount of time spent per week on course material, activities, readings, assignments, and exams.

Course structure: A typical online course at UW–Madison is organized into modules and uses Learn@UW to provide a virtual classroom environment in an LMS. The courses also provide tips

³ The following units are currently represented on the Online Course Design Committee: Division of Continuing Studies – Educational Innovation; Summer Term; College of Letters and Science – Learning Support Services; School of Medicine and Public Health; Division of Information Technology – Academic Technology; College of Engineering; School of Nursing; School of Education – Media, Education Resources, and Information Technology; McBurney Disability Resource Center; and University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries.

to students on studying the syllabus or provide weekly flow diagrams to convey an understanding of how the online course is structured and when different types of assessments will occur.

Communication: Communicating with classmates and the instructor is different in an online course. Level-set student expectations around types of interactions with instructors, TAs, and peers, and around response times.

Technology: Provide resources on hardware and software requirements, a tech-check to test the required technology, and a sample online course to practice navigating a virtual classroom in order to minimize technology glitches or setbacks.

Online and face-to-face course comparisons: Online courses require discipline and time management to fully engage the materials, and due to the condensed nature of summer session, the pace of classes can be two to three times faster than a full semester course. Provide students with tips they may already use for face-to-face courses that can also be applied to online courses (e.g., forming an online study group via a weekly online chat session) in order to set them up for success.

Project Development

Early in the process the committee went through considerable deliberation on what form this orientation would take. As the very first initiative of its kind on the UW–Madison campus, it not only had to be effective for students but also had to adhere to a practical development timeline, since the turnaround for this pilot was 6 months.

We began the creative brainstorming process in our committee in January 2015 and set deadlines that corresponded to campus-wide milestones (including when the schedule of classes was published, when students could enroll in summer, and when the summer session began).

We then brainstormed what content would be included, what form the materials would take, and the delivery methods through which they would ultimately reach students. Since we had members on the committee from all across the campus, a diversity of stakeholder perspectives was represented. After several brainstorming meetings, it was clear we wanted a fairly complete set of content in a variety of forms, with multiple delivery methods. To ensure the project stayed on track, we developed the following three parameters:

Limited scope: In keeping with our goal of adhering to a realistic development timeline, we intentionally controlled the scope of this pilot. We limited our audience to undergraduate students taking online summer courses.

Future scalability: The ability to scale—that is, change the size or scope of—the project into the future was a primary driver for this pilot. It was important to ensure that in later phases components of the orientation project could be scaled up to reach a broader student audience and included in more online courses and programs across campus.

Quality Matters standards: A way in which we attempted to guarantee a baseline of quality with this pilot was looking to the Quality Matters⁴ rubric and its standards (available to subscribers) related to orientation and introductory course material design. Quality Matters provides a set of guidelines as to what elements of course design are “essential” or “very important” for student success (Quality Matters, n.d.).

Components

Our committee developed the following four interdependent components as part of the online orientation project pilot.

Welcome Letter

A letter template created for instructors that welcomes students to their online summer class and provides initial instructions for getting started. This resource was created in a Microsoft Word document for maximum accessibility and ease of inputting course-specific information. The template includes recommended sections and instructions on how to tailor it in order to level-set student expectations in a *specific* online course. It is recommended instructors send their welcome letter via email to students at least a week before their course start date.

Informational Webpage: “Online Learning in Summer”

An informational webpage created for students. It contains introductory information intended to level-set student expectations around online learning *in general*. This is a direct-to-students, public-facing, publicly accessible resource that is broadly applicable and standardized for the entire audience of prospective or currently enrolled online students. The webpage is hosted on the UW–Madison KnowledgeBase (UW–Madison, 2016) and is broken into three main student action items (categories) with subcategories.

1. Learn what makes an online course different:
 - Time Management
 - Course Structure
 - Communication
 - Comparison to Face-to-Face
2. Test the required technology and view an Online Course Example:
 - Hardware Checklist
 - Software Checklist
 - Online Course Example

⁴ University of Wisconsin–Madison is a Quality Matters subscriber. Quality Matters is a “faculty-centered, peer review process that is designed to certify the quality of online courses and online components” (Quality Matters, n.d.).

3. Review the support resources available to you:
 - Technology Support
 - Library Support (informed by the library support staff on the committee)
 - Disability Accommodations and Accessibility (informed by the disability center specialist on the committee)

Online Course Example

The Online Course Example is an abbreviated version of an online summer course built in Desire2Learn, an LMS. It demonstrates what prospective or currently enrolled online students might experience when taking an online course. This is a simplified resource intended to familiarize students with the core components and navigation of a typical online course within an LMS. Instructions on how to access the Online Course Example are embedded in the informational webpage. Students gain access to both the course example and the informational webpage via links placed within the schedule of classes for select online summer courses during course enrollment. The Online Course Example has three components:

1. **Welcome message** posted by an instructor in the “news” section.
2. **Content area** populated with orientation materials and sample course material featuring actual content from two separate courses (Statistics and Communication Arts).
3. **Discussion area** populated with general discussion topics.

Start Here Module

The Start Here Module is a set of HTML pages that uses minimal styling, so that instructors can easily reuse or redesign these pages for any given course. Instructors or instructional designers can input the set of pages into the LMS as a “week zero” for an online course. Each page includes italicized instructional text to direct the user on how to tailor the customizable contents. This set of orientation pages contains five sections:

1. Course Overview
2. Activities to Get You Started
3. Technology in This Course
4. Learner Support
5. Additional Considerations (optional)

The idea behind the Start Here Module was that it had the potential to significantly standardize the initial student experience in online courses and would apply to a large number of courses across disciplines and programs.

Deployment and Evaluation

We engaged a variety of stakeholders to deploy the four components of our orientation: instructors, instructional designers, curricular representatives, student services, and students.

Given this was a pilot, we chose to reach out to a small network of instructors whose courses were ones that Summer Term was currently supporting with development funds or had supported in the past. We shared our vision with 15 instructors and worked with their departments to reach students.

For the 2015 pre-/post-assessment we included a resource question to ascertain whether students had been exposed to this orientation and, if so, whether they found it useful. We also wanted to see, in general, if we had improved the baseline established in the previous year. Of the students who responded, 68% said that the instructor emails were the most helpful resources while 43% said the introductory module was the most helpful resource.⁵ In addition, more students in 2015 (an increase of 11%) responded that they “very much liked” their online experience compared to 2014. Based on this survey feedback and the positive experience of working with stakeholders in the deployment phase, the committee considered the 2015 pilot successful and approved a second phase for 2016.

Now in the second year of the pilot, our committee is working on ways to scale up the orientation in order to reach a larger audience of instructors and students. In summer 2016, select portions of the orientation project were shared with 110 instructors teaching undergraduate online summer courses. We are also working on ways to better evaluate the usefulness of the orientation by including more specific questions related to the project in the pre-/post-assessment. In an effort to increase the response rate, we are sending it to a larger group of students, with reminder emails if they do not respond. The data collected will once again be used to inform the next phases of this project.

Conclusion

Both the online orientation components and the process behind their creation were unprecedented on the UW–Madison campus. Based on our experience, the following are key takeaways for summer administrators who may be considering implementing an online orientation project at their institutions.

Engage as many stakeholders as possible. Besides working with the academic units and administrative departments, also involve libraries, multiple development units, disability resources from across campus (to name only three) at all phases of development. By including multiple stakeholders, our resources were more complete, and the committee benefited from having multiple perspectives contributing to the content and design.

⁵ The evaluation was sent to 1,700 students (about 13% of summer students) and the response rate was 10%.

Use a collaborative and iterative approach. We used a highly collaborative and iterative approach in the development phase (e.g., a cyclical process of deliberating and drafting until a complete version is reached). For each of the four components we established a team leader who was responsible for creating drafts based on committee discussions and for bringing them back to the committee for review and approval.

Consider using Quality Matters. This organization will help guide development by providing a rubric against which to check your product. Using their rubric helped us create a structured process for designing content with an accepted standard of quality and set an example for future projects of its kind.

Maintain a student-centered focus throughout. What do students need to succeed in their courses? We used student survey data and had a student helper test various design components to ensure we were creating useful tools for students.

Create a system to receive feedback. To help ensure continual improvement and inform future iterations, we created both formal and informal mechanisms for receiving user feedback (e.g., surveys, email check-ins). We are using this feedback to inform future content, process additions, and make revisions.

References

Quality Matters. (n.d.). See <https://www.qualitymatters.org/higher-education-program>.

UW–Madison. (2016). Online learning in summer. Retrieved from go.wisc.edu/onlineorientation

Biography

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