

An Investigation into the Perceptions of First-time Online Undergraduate Learners on Orientation Events

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Abstract

Orientation programs have been used for years in face-to-face universities and colleges to help prepare new students adjust to their new college community by providing key information about school resources and providing an opportunity socially interact with other students. These orientation efforts have been a vital component in increasing a students' likelihood of persisting in their program of study (i.e. not dropping out). Distance Education institutions (often with online course offerings) tend to have significantly higher drop out rates than their face-to-face counterparts, and thus orienting new online students to their new online learning environment is a logical progression. However, orientation events need to be customized to the population if they are to have a significant impact on persistence. This study explores the perceptions that a group of online undergraduate students had of three different types of orientation events. These events included a traditional face-to-face orientation session, a pre-recorded course orientation video, and a live webinar. These perceptions were revealed in responses to an online survey and comments within and after the webinar. The study concludes with suggestions for further research and presents possible alternatives to the traditional methods of student orientation.

Keywords: orientation; induction; attrition; drop out; persistence; higher education; student perception; webinars.

Introduction

Successful completion of a course or program has been a grave concern for distance educators (Tyler-Smith, 2006; Rovai, 2003; Carr, 2000; Taylor et al., 1993; Bullen, 1996; Galusha, 1996) because distance education (DE) students have significantly higher rates of attrition (drop out) than their face-to-face counterparts (Bernard et al., 2004; Kember, 1996). DE students are at least 10 to 20 percent more likely to drop out than face-to-face students, with reasons ranging from a lack of communication and interaction with faculty (Carr, 2000), long turnaround time for faculty feedback (Taylor et al., 1993), course content not well suited for distance delivery (Bullen, 1996), and poorly designed course materials (Galusha, 1996). Persisting in one's course or program is a vital aspect of learner success (Cookson, 1990), and thus developing strategies to combat the high levels of attrition in DE is imperative for the field. Traditional face-to-face undergraduate institutions have long determined that properly orientating new students from high school, for example, to their new college or university learning environment, has an overall positive effect on the persistence of these students (Tinto, 1985; 1998). With the advent of new technologies, the traditional delivery of orientation events (e.g. 'welcome sessions', 'frosh' week) can now be contrasted with new, internet-facilitated methods. This paper reports on a study of the perceptions of first-time, online, undergraduate students' on orientation events geared at preparing them for their new online learning experience. In this paper the author presents the findings of a study conducted at an online division of a large, urban, Canadian university, in which the reasons for engaging (as well as not engaging) in three separate orientation events for online DE were investigated. These three events were as follows: a traditional, face-to-face, synchronous, real-time event (an orientation session); an online

asynchronous, delayed-time event (a pre-recorded course orientation video); and an online synchronous, real-time event (a webinar titled "Getting Ready for Online Learning").

Literature Survey

Persistence and Orientation

Tinto's (1975) model of student integration has provided a framework to understanding persistence and attrition in traditional undergraduate courses and programs. The model notes that students must be integrated both academically and socially to increase the likelihood of their persistence. Tinto (1975) stated that the importance of interactions with peers and faculty, and the need for students to feel as part of the learning community (and not at odds with it) is integral for persistence. Additionally, Tinto (1998) noted that this academic and social involvement is most important for students during the first year of college, when the "transition to college is not yet complete and personal affiliations are not yet cemented." (p. 169), and consequently when drop out is highest.

As a result of Tinto's work, many face-to-face colleges and universities presently offer various orientation events to help new students join into the college or university community. The type of orientation event can range from formal orientation sessions or workshops to informal 'meet and greets'. These interventions are typically 'face-to-face', and thus may not be optimal for online DE students. Differences between the two populations (face-to-face and online DE) in aspects, such as goal and institutional commitments, can make social integration very different for students in DE (Rovai, 2003). To address persistence, DE institutions need to:

- (1) ensure students' social and academic integration (Kember, Lai, Murphy, Siaw, and Yuen, 1994);
- (2) do so within the first year of instruction (Tyler-Smith, 2006); and
- (3) do so taking into account the specific attributes of the online undergraduate DE student population.

Social Integration in DE

To promote intimacy by building a feeling of community students synchronous discussions have been found to be helpful (Maples, Groenke and Dunlap, 2005; Motteram, 2001; Im & Lee, 2003). Synchronous communication is defined as communication that occurs at the same time and [virtual] place (Bernard, Abrami, Lou, and Borokhovski, 2004). This communication can be mediated through video-conferencing, audio-conferencing (e.g. VoIP), computer-conferencing, and/or a combination of these tools. In online DE, synchronous discussions are facilitated by synchronous communication tools. Examples of these tools include readily available (and free) applications such as MSN Messenger™ (which allows participants to converse either in text or by voice), as well as integrated components in Course Management Systems (CMS) such as FirstClass™, WebCT Vista™ and BlackBoard™, which typically permit text-based chats. Virtual classroom software, such as Elluminate™ and Adobe Connect™, are intended to create an online environment that mimics many of the characteristics of a classroom, using text, voice, and video communication. Some virtual classroom software also allows users to perform tasks such as collaboratively updating files, sending and receiving files, sharing the presenter's desktop image, and conducting polls.

Contrasting with synchronous communication is asynchronous communication, in which neither the instructor nor student communicate at the same time. Online asynchronous communication can occur through e-mail, discussion boards, posted course materials (such as a published PowerPoint™ presentation from an instructor), and websites, blogs and wikis, where participants can read and contribute material at their convenience (Carliner, 2002). Asynchronous DE has been found to outperform their synchronous counterparts on levels of achievement; however, not surprisingly, incidences of drop out are substantially higher in asynchronous DE than in synchronous DE (Bernard, Abrami, Lou, and Borokhovski, 2004). Synchronous components have been found to help students as they cross over from a face-to-face learning environment to an online learning environment (Garrison et al., 2003), which implies that orientation sessions geared towards facilitating social integration should involve synchronous components, and when content needs to be learned asynchronous components should be involved.

Orientation for online students

Since most DE programs now leverage online technologies, DE students typically are online students. Studies have suggested that what is needed to properly orient an online learner is systematically teaching skills needed to be successful learners in their online environment (Salmon, 1998). Online students require a different set of learning skills than those required for face-to-face learning, orientation events designed for this group need to be geared towards this different skill set. Motteram and Forrester's (2005) qualitative investigation of online student experiences of orientation events, suggests that orientation should take place online, but some students may need face-to-face interaction to quickly resolve issues. A new technology that may help to address this need to develop online orientation events is webinar technology.

Webinars (web-based seminars), are online synchronous events that use multimedia technology to host online seminars. Webinars run on a participant's computer, after they download the multimedia application and connect to a secure server. Webinar software typically includes the following features: a list of participants in the webinar (viewable by all participants); a forum for text chats; a two-way audio and video feed; and a presentation area which is typically used to show slides (e.g. from a PowerPoint™ presentation). This presentation area also facilitates showing the moderator's desktop to the participants, who often have the ability to share files and to conduct polls where participants can answer questions in the form of multiple choice and yes/no responses. Examples of web conferencing software used for webinars include Elluminate™, Adobe Connect™ (formerly Breeze), and Microsoft Live Meeting™.

The challenge for institutions that offer online courses is to design an orientation event that can positively impact online student persistence. This paper presents the perceptions of such events by a group of online undergraduate students. The research questions to address these perceptions were:

- 1) What did students perceive as their biggest fear to online learning when they registered for their first online course?
- 2) What were the reasons that students gave for engaging or not engaging in orientation events and how did this relate to their perception of their usefulness.

Methods

This study was conducted at the distance education division of a large, urban university in Canada, during the winter term of the 2006-2007 academic year. This university offers approximately 20 online undergraduate credit courses per semester, aimed at traditional undergraduate students enrolled at the university (typically ages 19 through 24) and returning adults who are continuing their education (ages 25 and over, and often working part-or full-time; many also have families). Course topics range from political science to philosophy and from chemistry to economics. Most of the courses support existing face-to-face degree programs in a given academic year.

One of the reasons that this online division of the university was chosen as the research site was that it had two of the three modes of induction (orientation) implemented prior to the study. Specifically, they had already implemented a face-to-face orientation sessions for new students that is delivered at the beginning of the academic school year (in September) and an asynchronous pre-recorded course orientation video made by the instructor of each course. Additionally, the division had conducted research on attrition the previous year, and so the instrument (an online survey) could be modified and re-administered to examine a new kind of orientation - a webinar.

Participants

Two sets of participants were recruited. The first set of participants voluntarily enrolled in a webinar entitled "Getting Ready for Online Learning", that the author developed and administered. These participants were invited (by mass e-mail to the online student community ~4500 students) to participate in a webinar for new students that would address issues of how to succeed in an online course and provide an opportunity to communicate and interact with other students.

In total, there were 22 participants in the webinar. The second set of participants responded to an online survey sent to the online student community (n= ~4500) a week before the deadline to drop courses without penalty. This survey, which was modified to include questions related to the perceptions of the orientation interventions, was responded to by 533 students, of which 207 were identified as first time online learners.

The Webinar

The 60-minute webinar was conducted at the onset of the term, and was delivered using the virtual classroom software vClass from Elluminate Live! The objectives of the session were to ensure that, at the end of the session participants would be able to:

- Prepare an ergonomically sound work area
- Create an online-learning file system on their desktop
- Create a learning schedule to plan and manage their semester.
- Communicate effectively in their online course.
- Access the university's online research tools
- Access and utilize online division's guide to online learning

The Survey

The survey consisted of 50 Likert scale questions and five open ended questions. The Likert scale questions used an assessment key with the values: 0-have no opinion; 1-strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3-agree; 4-strongly agree. The data retrieved for this study came from the open questions on the survey, which were as follows:

- 1) List the main reason(s) that would cause you to drop this course. (examples: poor performance on midterm, fell behind in the course, procrastinated too much, commitments at home...):
- 2) I attended the orientation session at the beginning of the semester. If yes, please state what you liked/disliked about it. If not, please state why you did not attend.
- 3) I watched the orientation video for my course. If yes, please state what you liked/disliked about it. If not, please state why you did not watch it.

These open questions were specifically geared to ascertain the perceptions that students had about the two orientation events, the face-to-face orientation session and the pre-recorded orientation video. The face-to-face orientation session was held in-person at the beginning of the school year. The session provided an overview of a number of practical issues associated with taking online courses, such as how students register and what to expect from an online course. The pre-recorded orientation video was a recording of the course instructor, who provided a background of the course topics and an overview of what was expected in the course. Students viewed these online course videos asynchronously online. These one-way video feeds were made available to students in the "Getting Started" section of their online course.

Results

The data analysis was conducted separately on the two sets of participants: the webinar participants and the year-0 or year-1 survey respondents.

Results from the Webinar

Some demographic information about the group was retrieved during the webinar using the polling feature in the application. This revealed that 37% indicated that they were in their first year of online learning, 16% were in their second year and 21% were in their third year (26% did not respond). 36% of webinar participants indicated that they were under 24 years, and 36% indicated they were older than 24 years (26% did not respond). To determine the perceptions about the webinar, the transcript of the session was reviewed, and specific responses to particular questions were grouped and for similar responses. Additionally, unsolicited comments about the webinar that were received by email were also reviewed. To ascertain what perceptions participating students had about online learning, open responses (n=14) retrieved during the webinar were grouped based on recurring themes in the statements. The groups of responses reflected that interaction (n=5), scheduling issues e.g., effective time management (n=5), and technology-related issues (n=3) were the most common fear that the students

reported they had when embarked on their first online course. Administrative (n=1) and academic issues e.g. understanding of content (n=1) were also concerns.

At the end of the session, the group was asked what they would 'take away' from the session, addressing the perceived usefulness of the webinar. All the comments received were positive, however, participants may have felt uncomfortable posting negative comments given that there was only a relative amount of anonymity because some real names (not aliases) were attached to the comments. The usefulness of addressing issues such as time management and using the discussion tools were reported. Some of these comments are presented in Figure 1.

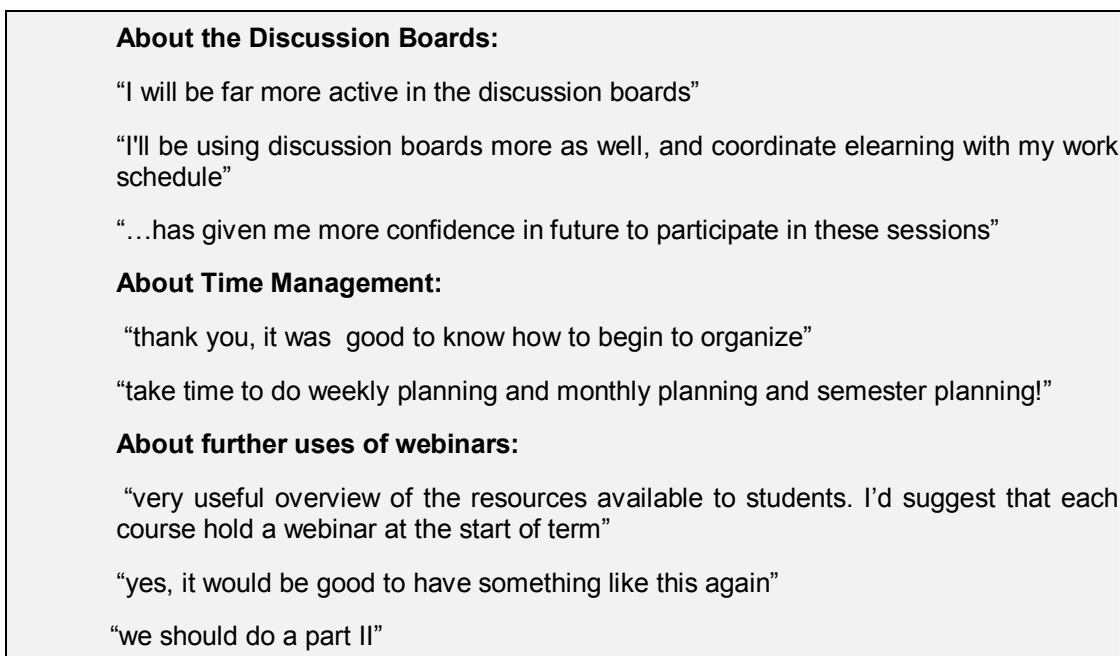


Figure 1: Categorized Webinar Responses

Results from the General Survey

The responses to the open questions on the online survey were grouped and coded for apparent emergent themes. To ensure reliability, a co-rater reviewed randomly selected responses and grouped them according to the themes that had been extracted by the primary researcher. There was a 95% reliability rating achieved. Descriptive statistics about the group was also attained via the Likert scale responses; however, there was no specific information regarding the perceptions of the orientation events solicited in the questions on this survey, and thus were not included in the final analysis.

In response to the question that asked for potential reasons why a student may withdraw (drop out) from an online course, several themes emerged in the responses:

- 31% of respondents (n=65) mentioned procrastination as a main reason. One participant responded “[If I] Fell so behind in the course that I couldn’t catch up at all”.
- 24% (n=49) mentioned evaluation components such as poor marks on midterm.
- One participant stated “A poor grade on any assignment or quiz would prompt me to drop the course.”
- 13% (n=26) could not specify a reason, but stated they would not be dropping the course. One participant stated “I don’t believe in dropping courses - period!!!!”.

- 12% (n=25) mentioned course content being a main reason. One participant stated “The main reason I would drop an online course would be because it does not interest me and the material is too hard to understand”.
- 8% (n=17) cited other commitments such as work as being a main reason for dropping. One participant stated “The reason I would drop the course would be if I had too many other commitments...”.
- 7% (n=14) gave no answer at all.
- 1% (n=3) mentioned poor instruction as a reason.
- One participant mentioned that technical problems as a main reason.

Table 1 summarizes these results.

Emergent Theme	Number of responses n=207
Evaluation – poor results on midterm or assignments	65 (31%)
Time Management - procrastination, falling behind etc.	49 (24%)
No reason...not dropping course	26 (13%)
Content – too much, too hard etc.	25 (12%)
Other commitments – both personal and professional	17 (8%)
Interaction - too little/no interaction	8 (4%)
Instruction - poor or no instruction/resources	3 (1%)
Technical problems	1 (0%)
No answer	14 (7%)

Table 1: Summary of potential reasons for dropping an online course

To the question, “I attended the [face-to-face] orientation session at the beginning of the semester. If yes, please state what you liked/disliked about it. If not, please state why you did not attend”:

- 86% of first time students stated that they did not attend (n=179). Of these students, the reasons given as to why they did not attend fell into seven categories.
- 26% (n=55), belonged to the theme “Did not attend because of other commitments”. One participant stated “I did not attend it because I had other obligations (work).”
- 20.2% (n=42) did not attend but did not provide a reason why.
- 15% (n=31) did not attend because they were late in registering, or they had heard about the orientation too late. One participant responded “I didn't attend because I registered after the orientation date.”
- 13% (n=27) did not attend because their expectations about the orientation session were low. One participant stated “I didn't attend the orientation session because all the information was already available online and because I took an online course specifically to avoid having to go to school.”

- 5.3% (n=11) did not know that there was an orientation session.
- 4.3% (n=9) did not attend the session because of location. For example one student remarked, "I did not attend because I live too far away to come into the city just for an orientation session".

Of the 14% (n=29) of respondents who did attend the session, an almost equal amount of students found it useful (5.8%, n=12), as not useful (6.3%, n=13). A small number of respondents attended but did not provide any feedback about it (1.9%, n=4). Table 2 summarizes these results.

Emergent Theme	Number of responses (n=207)
Did not attend because of other commitments	55 (26.4%)
Did not attend (no reason)	42 (20.2%)
Did not attend because registered (or heard about it) late	31 (14.9%)
Did not attend because they had low expectations	27 (13%)
Did not attend because they did not know about it	11 (5.8%)
Did not attend because of –location	9 (4.3%)
Did not attend – various reasons	4 (1.9%)
Did attend – found session useful	12 (5.8%)
Did attend – was disappointed	13 (6.3%)
Did attend but did not provide feedback	4 (1.9%)

Table 2: Summary of Reasons for Not Attending the Face-to-Face Orientation Session

In response to the question, "I watched the orientation video for my course. If yes, please state what you liked or disliked about it. If not, please state why you did not watch it", 80.7% (n=167) first time online learners stated that they watched the video. Their responses were categorized by three emergent themes.

- Most (50.2% of all respondents, n=104) had a positive experience with the video. One participant remarked "I did see it, and thought it was helpful. It gave me an insight about the program", another participant stated that "I liked that we got to see the instructor. I think that's who he was. It made it a bit more personal."
- A smaller number (13.5%, n=28) of respondents had either mixed or neutral feelings about the video, for example one participant stated "I did watch the orientation video, but to be honest there was nothing that I liked or disliked about it".
- A comparable group (13%, n=27) watched the video but had a negative response to it. For example one participant stated, "I watched the video and found that the professor seems too mechanized. I think that there should be more life put into the videos and an effort should be made so that the professors do not make it obvious that they are reading off a screen."
- Eight (8) students (3.9%) watched the video but did not elaborate on their experience.

Reasons that students did not watch the video fell into three emergent themes:

- 5.8% (n=12) had low expectations of the video and did not watch as a result. For example one student mentioned “I watched about 30 seconds of it. It was too slow and monotone for me. I believe that although this is an online course, the instructor's orientation should at least be interesting and enthusiastic which would promote the class.”
- Five students (2.4%) had difficulties viewing the video.
- Four students (1.9%) did not watch because of time commitments, for example one participant stated “I did not watch it because I never got around to it.”

The remainder of the students (8.7%, n=18) did not watch the video, but did not elaborate as to why. Table 3 summarizes the results.

Emergent Theme	Number of responses (n=207)
Viewed the video – positive experience	104 (50.2%)
Viewed the video – neutral/mixed feelings	28 (13.5%)
Viewed the video - negative experience	27 (13%)
Viewed the video – no reason	8 (3.9%)
Did not view the video - no reason	18 (8.7%)
Did not view the video - low expectations	12 (5.8%)
Did not view the video - technology	5 (2.4%)
Did not view the video - time commitments	4 (1.9%)
Did not view the video – late	1 (0.5%)

Table 3: Summary of Responses to the Question about the Course Orientation Video

Discussion

Student perceptions of the webinar

Although 60 students had initially signed up to participate in the webinar, only 22 participated. When non-attendees were asked why they did not attend, students cited technical difficulties and unforeseen circumstances, in which something unexpected came up—essentially the same primary reason for not attending the face-to-face orientation session (discussed later in this section). This suggests that the “anywhere, anytime” model of distance education applies not only to the courses, but possibly also to orientation events. Social integration that during the webinar was difficult to quantify given the small number of participants and the ‘one-time’ aspect of the event; however, the sharing of fears and concerns about online learning, the shared experience of the webinar, and the group reflection of ‘take aways’ at the end of the webinar did exhibit signs that social integration had occurred within the group. These signs included the results from the ‘take aways’ prompted in the webinar as well as unprompted ‘thank you’ e-mails from participants after the webinar to the author.

Student perceptions of the face-to-face orientation session

Results revealed that most first-time online learners that participated in this study did not attend face-to-

face orientation sessions (81% of those asked did not attend). The primary reason given for not attending was 'Other Commitments'. This is not surprising given that it has been well documented in the literature that many individuals choose distance education because of the convenience of the "anywhere, anytime" model. Other themes that emerged in descending order were as follows: the students' registering late (and therefore, after the session was held); low expectations; and location. Of those respondents who did attend, an almost equal number of students found the session useful as not useful.

Student perceptions of the online course orientation video

Results revealed that most (81%) students viewed the videos in their entirety, and of these 169 students, only 27 (16%) did not like the video. The rest enjoyed the video, did not comment, or were indifferent. One student remarked, "I thought the orientation video was a nice introduction to begin the semester, just like teachers do in a classroom environment.". What is evident from these results is that students primarily respond positively to having an introduction to what is ahead, much like what they would expect in a face-to-face class. Additionally, having the video within the course area is an orientation activity in which most first-time learners voluntarily engage. When investigating the reasons for viewing the video, students cite the convenience, availability, and usefulness of the information provided.

Limitations of the Study

Several potential limitations affect this study. One is that while some inferences could be made with regard to the perceptions of the attendees of the webinar, the small number of participants makes these perceptions non-transferable to a larger population.

Also, the webinar was the first of its kind at this institution, and thus aptly, there were lessons learned during this experience. One important lesson was the need to have an orientation webinar as a component of each course, embedded within the online course area. It would seem that students did not perceive the value-added from webinar participation, hence the low registration rate, so by expressing its potential value within the context of the course, may have had increased participation results. Another limitation of this study was incurred by costs. Webinar hosting can be an expensive endeavor for an institution, and in this case only one webinar was granted by the host to conduct this study. A full year, unrestricted license would be needed to develop administrative expertise in facilitating orientation webinars. Additionally, such a license would be needed to gain a full composite picture of the effects of the webinars on, for example, the persistence of new students. Last, the lack of co-rater reliability obtained from the webinar response groupings also compromises the validity of the results.

Conclusion

This study investigated the perceptions new online students at the undergraduate level had of orientation events. These orientation events were all geared to help ease the transition of these students from a traditional face-to-face learning environment to an online learning environment. The need to address comes from the higher levels of drop out experienced by these students. It is widely accepted that orientation events, as suggested by Tinto (1975) and others, do help combat attrition (drop out). By providing new students with the information they need to successfully embark on their academic journey, and also by helping create a sense of community for students, these orientation events provide the support that students often need in order to persist.

This study showed that while webinars have great potential to increase social integration of students, the low registration and participation imply that the perceived benefits are low for first-time online learners. Additionally, as the term progresses, this need for online students to socially integrate may likely increase, but being at the onset of the semester, and not course related, this social integration would likely have a marginal effect on students. Additionally, because the webinar was not attached to the courses that students were registered for, students likely did not perceive the webinar as an integral aspect of their learning. Perhaps if these webinars were offered periodically throughout a program, where students could become part of a learning cohort, sharing their learning experiences as they progress through a course or program, webinars could effectively increase social integration of these

online learning groups. This can only happen with full upper-level administrative support, providing not only the resources to conduct these webinars in a timely manner and strategically placing them within the online course area, but also allow time for personnel to develop expertise in conducting these webinars. A “build it and they will come” attitude is not enough to ensure success, and it can also end up being a costly error for those involved (Bates, 2000). Fortunately, webinar technology can and has been used to facilitate synchronous communication within online teaching, and so leveraging this technology in as many ways that one can is advantageous to administrators as well as online students and teachers.

This study also showed that while face-to-face orientation sessions can be also be useful for online students, like the webinar, their usefulness was not highly perceived by this student population (81% did not attend).

In contrast, the asynchronous course orientation videos were perceived by students as useful and important, as demonstrated by the significantly higher proportions of students that watched the videos (over 80% of new students). The fact that the course video was embedded in the course area is a likely contributor to this statistic, however another possible contributor is that they provide students an opportunity to “see” who their teachers are, thus providing a sense of ‘knowing’ who their teacher is and belonging to an actual ‘class’. Third, the current zeitgeist of online videos and websites such as YouTube™, which is easily accessible and also engaging for students, likely was factor in its popularity as well. Regardless, this method of delivery had the most effective uptake and must be considered.

To fully understand the implications and potential of online orientation events such as webinars, further research is needed. Research is required to determine what content would be most valued and useful for new online students. Since online students have different perceptions about the usefulness or importance of different types of orientation events, it is important that we continue to investigate ways to optimally design and delivering these events to effectively engage students. This study has found that having an orientation event that is online and connected to the online course area is important if students are to perceive the event as useful to their learning. An orientation webinar provides an innovative way to provide social interaction to students, as well as a forum to discuss the challenges that online learning may present; however, new students need to be made aware of their potential value to their entire learning experience if we expect them to engage.

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