How do Colleges and Universities use Technology as part of New Student Orientation?

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Author Note

This project was completed as part of the Fall 2015 section of "College Student Personnel Administration" under the instruction of Soncia Reagins-Lilly, Dean of Students, assisted by Mary De Sopo, Teaching Assistant. Many thanks to each for their support this semester.

The transition to post-secondary education is a critical point in the lives of college students, as both students and the colleges and universities they attend can attest to. To aid students in their transition, colleges and universities have developed and refined new student orientation programs, designed to impart "critical information about safety, integrity, decision-making, responsibility, and campus opportunities" to incoming students (Thomas and Nyatepe-Coo, 2012). Orientation programs, though varying widely in their execution, all aim to equip students with the knowledge and skills to succeed at their chosen institution.

Present in the lives of nearly all incoming students — and the staff of the institutions they enter — are modern digital technologies. The Internet, portable computers, mobile devices and other electronics have become commonplace in the lives of all residents of this country (and nearly all others) to varying degrees, the impact of which is largely unknown. As reported by *Inside Higher Ed*, nearly 90 percent of college students regularly used laptops last year, while 83 percent reported using smartphones on a regular basis– numbers that are still increasing year-over-year, as the article points out (https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2014/09/11/smartphone-use-rising-fast-among-college-students). It goes without saying that technology has infiltrated the daily lives of nearly all college students, the full benefits or detriments of which are beyond the scope of this analysis.

What will, however, be considered herein is the use of technology as part of new student orientation programs at the college and university level. Since it is clear that technology has become a part of our lives — and does not appear to be going anywhere anytime soon — the consideration of technological presence and integration should go beyond the personal level to include ways that technology is used in professional and educational settings, which is the focus of this analysis.

This paper will look at how technology is used as part of orientation at two different institutions of higher education: The University of Texas at Austin in Austin, TX, and Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH. The analysis will be informed by interviews conducted with a seasoned orientation professional at each institution, as well as with some input from an employee of a national higher education technology company. Themes will be identified, the learning experience will be addressed, and recommendations for the future will be provided.

This project will address the following formal learning outcomes:

- Review literature relevant to technology use as part of orientation at post-secondary institutions
- Compare and contrast technology use as part of orientation, including identifying common themes, at a small private school and a large public school
- Discuss the successes and areas for improvement in technology use as part of orientation at these institutions, and offer recommendations

Literature Review

Before delving into interview descriptions and analysis, undertaking a short review of relevant literature is pertinent, such that a conversation about technology and orientation can be framed in a larger sense.

Discussing technology and orientation concurrently is not a new concept; as Miller and Pope (2003) noted over a decade ago, not only has technology use in society and in higher education been increasing, so too have specific uses for "course registration … increased instructor access, better knowledge management, and distributed learning opportunities" been made available via technological evolution. The authors cited sources previous even to their work as furthering conversations about using technology not only for teaching and student engagement, but also for increasing efficiency and administrative functions as well (Miller and Pope, 2003). That being said, this earlier article's conversations around "technology" and "orientation" focus on the need to both expose students to technology and make them comfortable with using it,

something they found to be necessary at that stage in technological development (and in their focus population of community college students, many of whom they considered "non-traditional" and had varied levels of technological exposure).

Around the same time, and more directly related to this essay, Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA published a report detailing their experiences with transitioning a portion of their orientation programming from in-person to online (Yerk-Zwickl, 2004). Lehigh – very comparable in size to Dartmouth — decided to experiment with utilizing their recently-introduced online student portal to provide new students with information in "three main content areas" that included "the student's college/program area, a customized course selection tool, and an online Calculus-readiness test" (Yerk-Zwickl, 2004). After implementing the online content (what would be termed "pre-orientation modules" in the today's higher education lexicon), Lehigh administrators found that 90 percent of surveyed participants found the online content useful, and almost half of the users needed no assistance in completing the assigned tasks (Yerk-Zwickl, 2004). As a result, Lehigh decided to continue providing the information online, eliminating an in-person, pre-orientation weekend program that "was expensive in terms of dollars and time for Lehigh as well as the students and their parents" (Yerk-Zwickl, 2004).

Finally, a more recent study explored a specific example of technology use during orientation: Wells (2012) reviewed relevant literature on libraries' use of QR codes and gave a specific example of their use in a library scavenger hunt for first-year students. Finding limited literature documenting the implementation of QR codes to connect library patrons to various library services, and a similarly small literature collection on library scavenger hunts, the author took it upon herself to design and implement a music library scavenger hunt for new music majors at the University of the Pacific (Wells, 2012). She saw the project through from conception to design, implementation and even assessment, allowing for a more complete picture of the

effectiveness of this particular use case. Following a pilot program, an "official launch" of the QR code scavenger hunt was undertaken and student participants were surveyed; 85 percent of respondents felt that the activity increased their knowledge of library resources, with the activity receiving an average "fun" rating of 3.7 on a five-point scale (Wells, 2012). Overall, the project was considered a success, but necessitated a significant investment on the part of instructors to design and facilitate this technological activity. For comparison, a similar experiment at Canada's Dalhousie University, citing the work of Wells (2012), found a QR code-based library scavenger hunt similarly engaging and fun, but it too required a not-insignificant amount of investment on the part of library staff to ensure success (Parker, Helwig and Phinney, 2012).

Overall, diligent searching produced limited literature on technology use as a part of orientation; older examples discussed ways to inform new students about how to use technology in college, while more recent examples largely focused on specific use cases, such as QR code scavenger hunts (multiple articles on this specific topic, both peer-reviewed and not, were found in repeated searches). Even so, the preceding examples, while limited in scope, do provide a foundation from which to further discuss technology use as part of orientation.

Overview of Interviews

Before beginning an analysis of what interviewers said, it is helpful to introduce the interviewees themselves and their experiences in the field:

Kyle Clark, M.Ed., is an Associate Director of New Student Services at UT Austin. Kyle has worked in the field for more than a decade, and has had direct experience with UT Austin's orientation program and technology use for much of his career. *Anna Hall, M.Ed.,* is the Director of the Collis Center for Student Involvement at Dartmouth College. Recently promoted from the position of Director of Student Activities, Anna has worked in orientation at multiple levels since she began her career at Dartmouth nearly a decade ago. In the course of both interviews, this author

asked Anna and Kyle to give an overview of orientation programming at both institutions, as well as a general summary of the ways they both use technology in this respect. Both professionals were asked to comment on how their respective programs utilized technology in the past and at present, how they did so successfully, and what areas for improvement might be.

Melissa LaRosa, M.Ed., is the Regional Manager for Customer Success at OrgSync, a higher education "system-as-a-service" technology company founded at UT Austin and headquartered in Dallas, TX. Melissa is an alumna of UT Austin's Program in Higher Education Leadership, and was the principal implementation representative for Dartmouth's campus-wide rollout of OrgSync this past year. With her background in both higher education and technology, Melissa was able to discuss the use of technology and higher education in a broader sense. Discussion with Melissa centered around ways that OrgSync specifically was used during orientation and her comments were an appropriate supplement to those of Anna and Kyle.

Analysis

In the course of analyzing the knowledge gained from these interviews, this author will (1) identify common themes in orientation technology use at the institutions represented, (2) discuss four notable areas of difference in technology use, and (3) identify benefits and challenges in the ways that technology is used in orientation at both institutions.

Common Themes

A number of common themes emerged in both orientation and orientation technology use at Dartmouth and UT Austin. To the first point, Anna and Kyle both noted that orientation is considered a vital part of the student experience at their respective institutions, and professional staff are deeply committed to ensuring the most successful transition possible for all new students. Both institutions offer leadership development for current students in the form of heavily-involved

student orientation staff. While operating on very different scales, student staff at both institutions develop lasting connections with each other and incoming students, and rate their experiences working on orientation as a highlight of their careers as student leaders. Finally, when asked, incoming students at both institutions report that they are generally satisfied with orientation, a result that both Kyle and Anna reported as being relatively consistent year-to-year.

Areas of Difference

After speaking with Kyle and Anna about technology use as part of orientation at Dartmouth and UT Austin, respectively, four notable areas of difference emerged:

(1) *The "amount" of technology use.* In conversations with Kyle and from this author's personal experiences, it is clear that UT Austin uses more technologies, more often, as part of orientation programming. Technology use begins as soon as students receive their acceptance to the university in the form of class-specific social media accounts, which are actively administrated by staff in New Student Services. Both registration for orientation sessions and course registration for new students are online activities, facilitated by what Kyle referred to as "home-grown" computer systems designed and maintained by university staff. This stands in contrast to the comparatively low-tech operations of Dartmouth's orientation, as described by Anna and observed by this author. At Dartmouth, the two largest pieces of technology made part of orientation are the OrgSync platform and the college's orientation website. Both pieces of technology are utilized by both staff and students at Dartmouth, but both exist as systems that are designed and serviced by private, third-party companies.

(2) *The focus of technology use.* At UT Austin, orientation technology use is focused on social media (including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat), the orientation registration system, developing a detailed orientation schedule and orientation mobile

application, and administering an online survey to assess the orientation experience of all participants– all pieces that are actively edited and maintained throughout each summer orientation session. Dartmouth, meanwhile, focuses technology use on providing students information and a schedule of core events via the orientation website, providing important, official communications to new students via email, and tracking mandatory event attendance by swiping new students' ID cards through OrgSync-connected card readers.

(3) *Support of technology use.* UT Austin enjoys widespread support of technology use, both within orientation and the broader university community. Staff, students and faculty are actively engaged in using a variety of technologies, and are generally supportive of trying new ones. Dartmouth, perhaps surprisingly, sees comparably low support for technology use; other than Anna, staff involved in planning orientation are reticent (even openly opposed) to technology use, especially newer platforms like OrgSync or social media. The university as a whole is markedly less "tech friendly" than UT Austin or many other institutions, relying instead on "established" communication methods like paper and email. For example, Anna noted, Dartmouth has only had an orientation website for the past six years.

(4) *Student engagement with technology as part of Orientation.* Students at UT Austin demonstrate high engagement with core orientation technologies like social media and registration systems; incoming students utilize their class-specific social media accounts before, during and after orientation. Kyle mentioned that registration systems experience slow-downs and even crashes as a result of the number of students accessing them at once. He also highlighted the approximately 20 percent response rate of new students to post-orientation surveys, which, according to Kyle, is noticeably above the

average response rate for online assessments. This stands in opposition to Dartmouth, where students tend to disengage somewhat with many common forms of technology use, save for email, as they become part of the Dartmouth community.

Discussion

UT Austin capitalizes on student technology use before, during and after orientation, and leverages it to boost student engagement and "drive home" orientation messaging, as Kyle phrased it. Use of technology as part of orientation enjoys broad support across the institution, and the "home-grown" registration systems are generally effective and continually improved. Social media use at UT Austin is very high, beginning as soon as students are admitted and continuing throughout summer orientation sessions and into the academic year. Additionally, orientation surveys regularly see high response rates and thoughtful free-responses, a key element considering UT Austin's ever-increasing focus on assessment.

However, facing continual increases in incoming class sizes, UT Austin struggles with scale as it relates to technology. Although Kyle made it clear that Orientation technology use is an established norm, the systems used have had difficulties handling the sheer number of students trying to access them. Kyle also discussed the desire of orientation staff to track attendance at orientation sessions in real-time — a topic of interest for a number of years now, he said — but have thus far been unable to find a system that would fit the scale and pace of UT Austin orientation sessions. This is one important area that Kyle indicated would become a focus of more discussion in preparation for future orientation sessions.

Dartmouth, a small, Ivy League institution, relies largely on established forms of technology — websites, email and even paper mailings — to disseminate information to new students before, during and after orientation; the school faces challenges adopting and supporting technology. Dartmouth sees relatively low support of new and expanded technology use across the

college, and orientation is no different. Technologies used during orientation focus largely on providing "core" information to students on "static" webpages; only recently has Dartmouth began using the OrgSync platform, spearheaded by Anna alone, to connect Orientation Team leaders (current students) with incoming students, and largely in the form of "one-way" communications from staff and student leaders to new arrivals. Social media is rarely used in an official capacity, in orientation or across the institution, but does see moderate engagement in the form of a Facebook group dedicated to each incoming class. As part of the OrgSync rollout, now in its third phase, orientation staff have this year gained the ability to take attendance at mandatory events by swiping new student ID cards: a feature that both Anna and Melissa, the OrgSync employee, discussed at length as being a powerful technology tool for orientation. Melissa explained that the card swiping allows event organizers to not only track attendees, but to also run reports on their student demographic information and communicate with all those who attended. Anna praised this ability highly, particularly the feature that automatically emails students as soon as they swipe their IDs, notifying them that their attendance has been recorded; she noted that this dramatically increased student attendance at mandatory events and necessitated the use of overflow event seating for the first time in her memory. While the OrgSync rollout is exciting for Dartmouth, the platform is still working toward widespread adoption by the student body, who remain wary of any new technologies seen as being "pushed" onto them by the Dartmouth administration.

The experiences of Dartmouth as they relate to using OrgSync during orientation were echoed by Melissa in her interview. While Dartmouth is not the only school using OrgSync for orientation purposes, it became clear by speaking with Melissa that OrgSync is not yet an integral part of any school's orientation programming, and that the platform is only just beginning to see more use at orientation (specifically surrounding ID card swiping for attendance tracking). This is attributable to the fact that OrgSync is focused on campus connection and student organization

management, and that, as all three interviewees mentioned, the peculiarities of authenticating incoming students within universities' electronic systems often prevents students from fully using some technologies until they have registered for courses– usually after completing most or all of orientation. As a result of this and of OrgSync's focus on broader university needs, this author's interview with Melissa provided mostly support for the analysis of Kyle and Anna's experiences as opposed to adding new information to this essay.

Conclusion

Technology use during orientation has evolved over time, from merely a topic of discussion to prepare new students for college life, to a way for administrators to record and manipulate data efficiently, to a broad set of tools that drive student engagement from acceptance through to orientation and the first term of classes. After completing this project, this author might offer the following reflections and recommendations:

- Technology is not going anywhere; its use in higher education cannot and should not be ignored, and more research in this area is necessary for fully understanding this nuanced and evolving topic
- UT Austin demonstrates multiple examples of successful orientation technology use that drives student engagement and builds community among new students
- Dartmouth, while less "tech savvy," has successfully implemented attendance tracking software that has boosted student attendance noticeably, and continues to execute successful orientation programs both with and without added technologies
- Social media, with all its widely-discussed merits and pitfalls, is a powerful tool for messaging, engagement and community building, and all institutions can and should develop a strong social media presence tailored to their campus and student body
- Finally, orientation provides a valuable opportunity for students to meet, network, and build community face-to-face; these interactions (and their lasting benefits) cannot be replaced by digital technologies, and technology use should strive to enhance, not replace, this core tenet of orientation

Orientation is an essential component of the student experience. While the institutions discussed here employ orientation technologies in largely different ways, the significance of

orientation and a dedication to the successful transition of new students to their chosen post-secondary institutions remains at the forefront of the work of this author, his interviewees, and the studied university communities overall.

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