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Developing an Online Orientation Program for Transfer Students to Arizona State University

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Arizona State University (ASU) is the fourth largest public university in the nation. Located in Tempe, Arizona, the main campus enrolled 36,761 students in Fall 2003, 3,978 of which were new transfer students. *U.S. News and World Report* ranks ASU second in the number of transfer students received annually. The majority of these transfer students come from community colleges in Arizona, and 3.5% come from out of state. Transfer students tend to be commuter students.

In response to a low (11%) attendance rate at orientation by students transferring to ASU, a campus-wide team was formed to create and implement a service to increase transfer student participation and successful completion of ASU enrollment. Online Transfer Orientation (OTO) was selected as the best solution to help Undergraduate Admissions (UGA) meet its goal of having all admitted students participate in orientation and offering them a 24 hour a day, 7 day a week resource. The purposes of OTO included encouraging early registration and orientation participation and keeping transfer students on track to meet professional program application deadlines. Also, OTO recognized orientation as a process, allowing for post-admission follow-up, and reduced phone calls and e-mail.

UGA Transfer Services, Marketing and Communications, and Orientation staff engaged support from advisors and Student Affairs Computing Services. The team facilitated feasibility meetings, planning sessions, testing, revisions, and evaluation. Survey results indicated that students found phase I of OTO (OTO I) easy to navigate and helpful in completing enrollment. Phase II of OTO (OTO II), launched December 2002, offered the first online orientation customized by semester of admission, major,

college, and time of entry into online orientation.

Implementation and Challenges

Developing the Plan

Team members reviewed online orientations (including models from the University of Utah, the University of California, Los Angeles, and George Washington University), none of which addressed the complex, specific issues planned for OTO I or offered evaluative data. This left the team with the rate of participation in ASU's traditional programs and participation in OTO I as the benchmark for number of transfer students attending orientation either online or in person. The co-leaders outlined activities that students should complete online, designed a website that would be compatible with the existing Web portal for transfer students, and discussed Web application development. The initial plan included both OTO I and OTO II.

The next step engaged academic advisors from all ASU colleges and staff from essential campus departments. The support from around campus was overwhelmingly positive.

Design (Content and Graphic Design) and Testing

Notes from meetings were compiled and written into over 400 online screens. Final recommendations from advisors were incorporated into the customized screens for each college in OTO II. The visual design of OTO mirrors the "family" look created in recruitment publications and complements the UGA Web site. For OTO II, each of the 87 majors were considered individually so that students could have a complete orientation. Some majors were treated individually and ultimately, some were treated by college. Applicants were asked to test and make recommendations throughout the design process. Students generally commented that OTO was exactly what they were looking for and that they would be able to complete the orientation process on their own. Advisors also tested and contributed comments.

Use of Resources

Team members worked on the project approximately 25-50% time of a 40-hour work week during the initial development. Web development staff spent approximately 75% time of a 20-hour work week for several months to make OTO II a reality using a database to help future Web staff keep OTO II up to date. Team members focused on presenting an accurate reflection of on-campus orientation as well as being editorially sound and attractive.

Measurement and Evaluation

Evaluation of OTO included comparisons of OTO to other online orientations, tracking questions from students about OTO, tracking the number of site visits, and surveying admitted transfer students.

Online Orientation Comparisons

Rielley (2000) has offered the most relevant online orientation literature. He categorized existing online orientation Web pages as *Basic*, *Enhanced*, and *Online Orientation*. OTO II exceeded the criteria of *Online Orientation* (course registration, textbook purchase, parking decal purchase, and tuition payment), and customized for students the semester of admission, the college of each student's major, and time of entry into the orientation. Each month, the list of activities in the "urgent" column changed; this allows students to begin the orientation process immediately and encourages them to take care of university business in a timely manner.

Questions

Of 4,899 students who were mailed a letter directing them to the Online Transfer Orientation between February 2 and September 10, 2002, 95 students called the telephone number listed. Six students called regarding difficulty with the site. Twenty-five students who did not have access to the Web in their homes called; their questions were answered on the telephone and they were directed to academic advisors. The majority of calls were from students who did not read the letter; they were directed to go online.

OTO I Visits

Only the 4,899 transfer students receiving the letter with the Web address had access to it. Visits to www.asu.edu/admissions/transforientation numbered 8,835.

OTO II Visits

1,978 transfer students were admitted for Fall 2003 as of February 28, 2003. Students admitted up to December 12, 2002, were accessing OTO I. 3,178 visits were made to OTO II between December 12, 2002 and March 6, 2003.

Survey Results

To assess how well the OTO worked, 300 randomly selected matriculated students for the 2002 fall semester received surveys. The survey incorporated a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Of the respondents, 65.9%

agreed or strongly agreed that OTO was easy to navigate; 6.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 72.4% agreed or strongly agreed that the site was helpful; no one disagreed; one respondent strongly disagreed.

College of enrollment and ethnicity were not factors influencing students' ease of navigation; however, women found OTO easier to navigate than did men. Both men and women reported the same degree of helpfulness, as did all ethnic groups.

Conclusion

The ASU OTO team identified a barrier to timely completion of enrollment activities for transfer students, analyzed the problem, recommended an online solution, created a campus-wide team, developed and implemented the solution, evaluated OTO I, and customized and launched OTO II according to timeline. The success of OTO was achieved without additional cost to the university (although there were obviously costs associated with time spent in-house) and has made it possible to better use orientation resources for freshman students. Individual colleges have improved their online information and services, and advisors indicate that students are better prepared for advising appointments. Overall, the Online Transfer Orientation has been a success.

Reference

- Rielley, D. F. (2000). The growing trends of orientation web pages. *The Journal of College Orientation and Transition*, 7(2), 41-43.