

By Vicki Valosik

# Innovative Orientations

**IN AN AGE OF DECREASING UNIVERSITY BUDGETS**, increasing international student populations, growing global access to high-speed Internet, and changing approaches to teaching for the digital generation, it is not surprising that many universities are moving their international student orientations online. Whether to supplement traditional orientations on campus or to replace them, orientations conducted online often lead to cost savings and more efficient use of staff labor, and enable international student services offices to keep better records of who received what information and when. In addition, some universities report that international students who complete an online orientation prior to their arrival seem better prepared for student life in the United States.



Just as no two campus orientations are exactly alike, universities are finding a number of creative ways to present orientation materials in an online format that fits with their budgets and the needs of their students and staff—from simple PowerPoint presentations to more elaborate programs including videos, interactive games, or student chat rooms.

### Finding the Right Style

At California Lutheran University, which began offering an online make-up orientation three years ago, international student-advising staff wanted to keep the traditional orientation in place but also provide an alternative for

students unable to make it to campus in time to attend. Although there are usually only a handful of international students who miss orientation, says Juanita Hall, senior director of multicultural and international programs, it was critical to provide a way for them to receive the same information. They started small, with a PowerPoint presentation accessible through the university website, but are now transitioning to an online video that was made by the media services department which filmed the in-person orientation sessions. “I felt like the PowerPoint slides were torture,” Hall says with a laugh. “Students today would prefer to watch a human being give information and tell a few stories to illustrate what’s going on.”

The new online orientation video focuses on visa regulations and will include a quiz and printable certificate at the end. Once students arrive on campus and show that they have completed the online orientation, Hall and her colleagues will review the remaining materials with them individually. This is not an option that Hall likes to advertise, however. “It’s just something we provide if they’re absolutely going to be late. We don’t want to encourage students to miss orientation because they start kind of behind the eight ball, and we want them to get the full experience and to be able to connect with other students.”

### Online Orientation Required

Northern Arizona University (NAU) began offering an online orientation in the fall of 2013, also as a make-up option, but quickly realized the benefits of requiring all international students to complete it, including those

who attend the in-person orientation. By the spring semester it was mandatory.

"The big thing for us is that everything's trackable now," says Sean Milton, international student adviser at NAU. In the past, if a student violated a visa regulation, for example, and claimed to be unaware of the rules, it was difficult for Milton or his colleagues to show that he or she received that information. "We might be able to find the orientation attendance records and see that he was there at 8:00 a.m. to check in, but that doesn't mean he didn't leave. Now I can say, 'You shouldn't have done that and here is a record of your online orientation proving that you knew that.' We are accountable for what we presented."

All new international students are sent a link a couple of weeks after school starts to complete the online orientation—a PowerPoint presentation hosted on Blackboard Learn that repeats some of the most critical information presented at the in-person orientation. A hold is placed on their accounts until they have completed the orientation and passed a quiz. "This way we have some redundancy in the materials we think are important," says Milton, "but also the freedom to do more of what we want to do in a fun, social way to welcome new students at orientation and can spend less time trying to cover every possible important topic in sessions that tend to put students to sleep."

## Online Orientations Cut Costs in Half

At Washington State University (WSU), new international students are required to complete an online orientation called the iCoug Tutorial before they arrive. The online orientation was launched last fall and has enabled the university to reduce its international orientation duration and budget by half and to better integrate it with the domestic new student orientation, says Cheryl Hansen, director of global services at WSU. The iCoug Tutorial is divided into five modules and consists of a staff introduction video with funny outtakes, PowerPoint slides with audio, maps, animated clips featuring avatars narrated by current

## In-Country Predeparture Orientations

While more and more universities and colleges are using the internet to virtually orient students across the pond or across the globe, Michigan State University (MSU) has taken a more hands-on approach. For the past five years, MSU's Office of International Students and Scholars has been conducting in-country predeparture orientations for its incoming cohorts of students from China, sending staff and a handful of Chinese students to Shanghai and Beijing to meet with incoming students and their families.

"It started out as a high-touch moment, not only to put the students in some level of comfort but also the parents," says Peter Briggs, director of the Office for International Students and Scholars at MSU. "You've got a lot of people invested in [these students]: two sets of grandparents and parents, and how much do they know about coming to the United States or Michigan State University? It's good for the parents to have somebody they can trust and to know that there is a point of contact if something should happen. That's a lot of why we're doing this."

Each spring, after admissions

decisions are sent out, acceptances confirmed, and deposits received, his office mails invitations in both English and Chinese to all incoming Chinese students to attend a predeparture orientation session with one family member. In 2013, 1,000 invitations were sent, and 600 students, plus family, attended. Most of the orientation is in Chinese,

apart from a brief welcoming speech from an MSU representative, whether Briggs or a colleague. Most of the remaining content is presented by MSU alumni living in China or members of Project Explorer, a leadership organization for Chinese students at MSU. "Involving these students and conducting it mostly in Chinese has been valuable and helped us make the best use of our time," says Briggs. "If you did it bilingually and had to translate every speech, you couldn't get as much done."

Plus, he adds, "The new students can see other Chinese students who have not only gone to MUS but have been successful and seem to like it there. The enthusiasm is infectious. What we are trying to do is set up expectations, but a lot of what it does is humanizes the experience."

While they do cover a good bit of logistical and cultural material in the six-hour sessions, Briggs says they are careful to call it a "predeparture orientation" because they don't want to discourage anyone from attending the on-campus orientation, which provides the full campus experience and the opportunity to meet students of other nationalities. "I think the best orientation programs are flawed only because there's so much to absorb and you can only remember so much," says Briggs. "So if this spreads it out a little bit, so much the better, but the intent is to be much more high-touch, meaning that they meet people. If they don't remember a thing, but they remember they liked you and they trusted you, you're good."





international students, discussion boards, and housing and course registration portals. Students can begin the iCoug once they are accepted at WSU. After they have passed each module, they are eligible to register for up to nine credits of core courses prior to arrival.

Although the in-person orientation is still required, says Hansen, “we recognized that international students really needed to engage and have interactive information about WSU and the Pullman community before they arrive. We also wanted to get them registered for courses. International students often get what’s leftover in classes because they can’t enter the country more than 30 days prior to the start of their program. We just feel they’re so much better prepared now than ever before.” She adds, “A highlight we weren’t expecting is the interaction between students on the discussion boards talking to one another about their backgrounds, what they are planning to

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study, asking housing questions. One group even spun off and created a Facebook page.”

### More Creativity in Online Orientations

For Texas A&M University, moving to a mandatory online orientation enabled international student advisers to ensure that all new students received the same information and to become more creative with the in-person orientation. In 2011 they expanded the traditional orientation into an optional international student conference that is open to both new and returning students, as well as family members and faculty and staff. The

conference includes new student workshops and sessions tailored to upperclassmen on topics such as applying for Optional Practical Training and graduation requirements.

“One of the reasons we initially thought about incorporating current students was because we were already putting in this effort to create this event,” says Samantha Clement, Texas A&M senior international student adviser, “and having some additional concurrent sessions that appeal to current students doesn’t add a considerable amount more work but gives our students an additional chance to get this information. More so, we wanted current and new students to have the chance to meet and interact.”

While the conference is optional, all new international students must complete the online orientation before they can schedule a check-in appointment and register for classes. With tracks specialized according to students’ immigration statuses, academic levels (graduate or undergraduate), and campus locations, the online orientation is able to provide customized information for each student prior to his or her arrival. As a result, says Clement, the number of e-mail questions she and her colleagues receive has gone down.

### Top Tips for Starting Your Orientation Online

**Use the tools you already have.** When creating an online orientation, Milton advises looking beyond cost-prohibitive software programs and at what tools are already available at your university. “We [at Northern Arizona University] were wanting to do something online, then it occurred to us we already have a system, Blackboard Learn, that students are required to use as part of their academic experience here. And it was already paid for, so we said, ‘Let’s give it a shot.’” An added bonus, he says, is that they are helping

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students get acquainted with software they will be using for many of their classes.

Similarly, at Washington State University, Hansen says they were able to create their online orientation free of charge due to help from graduate students, who did the editing and engineering, and from the Global Campus Department at WSU, which specializes in creating online courses and built the orientation under their e-course framework. They added orientation content as if it was course material and enrolled students in the “course” as soon as they were accepted to the university so that they could see the content and take the quizzes.

**Give students a strong incentive to participate.** Juanita Hall at California Lutheran University recommends employing the “carrot” method to encourage students to complete the online orientation—withholding a certain service until the orientation

requirements have been met. At her university, SEVIS registration is the carrot, while at others, such as Texas A&M, students cannot register for courses until they’ve completed the orientation.

**Be mindful of accessibility.** Some institutions are requiring online orientations, but if your university is going to make the online orientation mandatory, it must ensure that it is accessible to all students regardless of their capabilities. Clement of Texas A&M advises consulting one’s university’s disability services office when creating orientation content.

Another roadblock might be Internet accessibility. While Hansen at WSU is unaware of any students being unable to complete the orientation due to lack of Internet access, she says that she and her colleagues were mindful of keeping the orientation videos at a low resolution to account for slow internet speeds, and that each semester they set up a

computer lab for any students who have not completed the orientation by the time they arrive on campus.

**Make a plan, then tweak it.** Clement also advises deciding exactly what you think students need to know before arriving and making a detailed outline. “We have a never-ending list of ideas of what we would like to be able to do with our online orientation, but it’s not all going to be possible,” she says. “It needs to be targeted, limited, and really addressing the most important information.”

“By no means is it ever a finished product,” concludes Clement. “It is a work in progress. It is not a task you can do and say, ‘Now it’s done.’ There’s always room for improvement.”

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