



The Orientation & Transition Process

A COMEVO WHITE PAPER

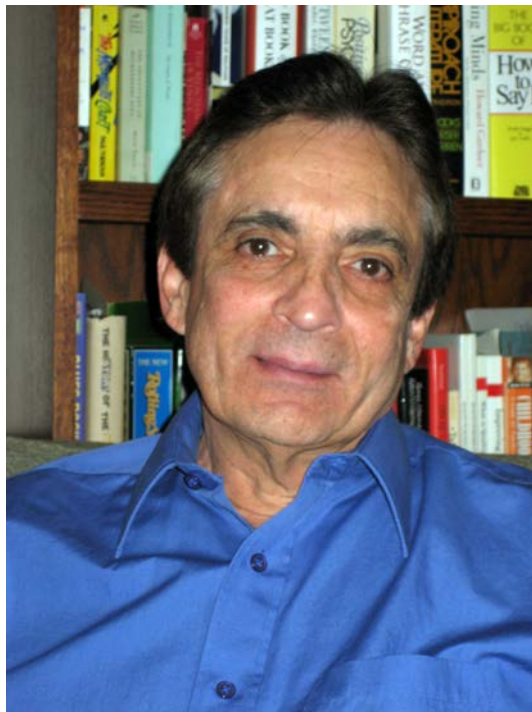




Introduction

At Comevo, what we know best is software. What our clients know best is the theory and practice of providing effective student orientation and transition programs. Just as we teach student success professionals how to use our software for the greatest impact, we often look to them for news of the evolving developments and challenges they encounter on their campuses. The more we know about what you do, the more effective we can be in our mission of delivering a product that helps students succeed.

We recently had the opportunity to talk with Dr. Joe Cuseo, one of the foremost authorities on student orientation and retention programs. Joe shared many observations that were so valuable to our staff we felt obliged to pass them on. If you've had the chance to hear Joe speak or have read his publications, you know he has a gift for synthesizing volumes of theoretical research into concise, practical, applicable presentations. Our conversation with Joe began as a simple inquiry about the state of orientation programs today, but quickly became an instructive, insightful discussion of how far student orientation and retention programs have come, and how far they have to go.



ABOUT JOE CUSEO

Joe Cuseo, Ph. D., holds a doctoral degree in Educational Psychology and Assessment from the University of Iowa. Currently, he is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Marymount College (California) where for more than 25 years he directed the first-year seminar, a course required of all new students. He is a columnist for a bimonthly newsletter published by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, and has received the Resource Center's "outstanding first-year advocate award." He is also a 14-time recipient of the "faculty member of the year award" on his home campus, a student-driven award based on effective teaching and academic advising.

Background

The first collegiate new student orientation took place over 100 years ago, and today, the majority of higher education institutions offer some form of welcome and orientation to incoming students.

Despite the fact that the majority of schools view orientation as a comprehensive process rather than a singular, time-limited event, the need to successfully integrate students into their new academic, cultural and social environments often goes unmet. Our conversation with Joe Cuseo sheds some light on why this gap between orientation objectives and outcomes exists.

Frontloading

Cuseo notes that the movement towards orientation as a comprehensive process has grown for a number of reasons. “One, we’ve realized that orientation as an event – a densely packed day of campus tours and a long parade of talking heads – is actually disorienting to new students,” he says. “We bombarded them with information they didn’t need yet, and we

delivered that overload of information in a very efficient, but ineffective way – talking at them.”



This orientation format was not born of ignorance. Cuseo explains that, for years, orientation professionals mistakenly subscribed to the belief that the first six weeks of a student’s experience on campus were absolutely critical, and that we had to give them all the tools and resources we could as quickly as possible, or they would fail. “We know now that that simply isn’t true,” he says. “Although first experiences and first impressions matter, it’s much more complicated than that.”

Even though it was with the best of intentions, most schools ultimately were guilty of saturating new students with untimely, “just in case” information that they simply couldn’t absorb in one sitting. Cuseo believes that there are still too many campuses doing this today.

The Three Transitions

In 1989, Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering published a paper on retention of adult students¹ in which they introduced the concept of assisting students as they moved in, moved through, and moved on from college.

Cuseo embraces this comprehensive approach. “We continue to expand the way we think about orientation,” he says. “It has evolved from a focus on the first few weeks of college to a realization – a realization supported by research – that we serve students best by extending orientation not only through the first term, but throughout the first year.”

The ultimate challenge, as Cuseo notes in *Seven Powerful Properties & Principles of Effective First-Year Program Delivery*, is to deliver programs in the right way, at the right time.



First Year Experience

First year experience (FYE) courses have remedied many of the complaints about the overload common in orientation events: they provide an opportunity to distribute (rather than dump) information to students in a “just in time” manner. They also provide new students with more opportunities for social integration and personal validation, two elements Cuseo deems absolutely integral to successful orientation programs.

The research regarding how FYE programs influence academic success is impressive, yet many schools only offer extended orientation through the first term; just a few continue the first year transition experience into the spring term.

While he has been a stalwart supporter of the FYE programs since their inception, Cuseo believes that many still aren’t designed to meet students’ evolving needs. “The truth is,” he says, “most orientation programs or courses run through Christmas, and then we pull the rug out from under them.”

The idea that students don’t need support or guidance after their first term is shortsighted, Cuseo says. “If we’re really concerned with persistence and retention, we need to build in

the support students need when they need it most.”

Cuseo also points out a critical period many schools ignore. “We lose most of our students to attrition between their freshman and sophomore years,” he says. “Yet 90% of schools have nothing in place to bridge that gap. We need to consider re-recruiting and advising the sophomore class with the same kind of energy we used to recruit and orient the freshman class.”

Many schools have begun to utilize technology to provide much of that support. Timely emails

and text messages can provide links to online resources that offer tips to students preparing for midterms, registering for classes for the following term, or studying for finals.

The mantra echoed in many of Cuseo’s papers and presentations is the same: it is our responsibility to provide support for the orientation and transition to college, through college, and out of college. At Comevo, we have helped provide much of that support with our @school Online Orientation™ software.



Challenges

When asked why – if the evidence proves that they work – retention programs like the FYE classes aren't required at every school, Cuseo cites a number of reasons. "The fact is," he says, "many schools can't get FYE classified as an elective, let alone as a requirement."

Faculty

Why not? "The greatest obstacle is faculty," he says. "Many student success programs have tried to make the FYE classes a required prerequisite on their campuses. Unfortunately, student success programs rarely win a curriculum turf battle. If the engineering department or the school of business wants to add another required course, that will almost always take priority over the FYE class."

The good news is that, even if a school does not offer a credited FYE course, much of the content those courses present can be delivered to students via online resources.

Cuseo says there is also resistance from some faculty who consider orientation as overprotective handholding. "The nature of the student body is dramatically different than it was a generation ago," he says. "I've encountered faculty who don't seem to register

the changing demographics of our students or the changing reality of the work world. Where college was once a place for the privileged, we now need to design our support programs to meet the needs of historically underserved student populations."

These student populations include first generation students, minority students, low-income students, transfer students, working adults, veterans and military-affiliated students, and foreign students. Each of these groups has its own unique adjustments to make as they navigate in unfamiliar terrain: they need particularized support services designed for each step of their journey, not just the outset of the journey.

Collaboration

Another inherent challenge common on many campuses is the departmental disconnect between the staff who plan orientation and the staff who conduct transition programs like the FYE course. In many cases, both programs present duplicative content while other critical content is absent.

Cuseo asserts that a key ingredient of successful student support programs is collaboration.

“Effective programs are interrelated and integrated, not isolated and disjointed,” he writes, and cites Braxton & Mundy’s conclusion following a 2001-2002 study of campus retention initiatives: “The most meaningful and far-reaching institutional efforts call for collaboration within university divisions and departments. These relationships are imperative to effective retention programs and efforts.”²

Passive Programming

Finally, Cuseo has demonstrated that – to be effective – orientation and transition programs must be proactive and intrusive. “On many campuses,” he says, “there’s the will but not the way. We offer passive programming in the hope that students will take advantage of it, when we know that passive learning is an oxymoron. We need to deliver our programs in a more intrusive, outreach fashion.”

Cuseo says this may be especially true at commuter campuses such as community colleges. “If participation in support programs is optional, many students will opt out. And the cruel irony is that the students who opt out are

usually the very students who need those programs the most.”

The argument for mandatory orientation programs and FYE classes has another side, especially at community colleges. Alicia Huppe, Dean of Enrollment and Student Success at Collin College, says her school offers a variety of voluntary face-to-face orientation programs, followed by online orientation modules students complete at their own pace.

“Community colleges serve a very different demographic than universities,” she says. “Many four-year schools have the luxury of a large applicant pool competing for a limited number of admissions – a luxury that allows them to mandate participation in orientation without fear that such a mandate might discourage students from attending that school. At community colleges such as ours, we’re working with many first generation students, students with families and working adults who simply don’t have the time to participate in an elaborate orientation program. My ultimate concern is that our orientation remains a genuine student support service without becoming a barrier to registration.”

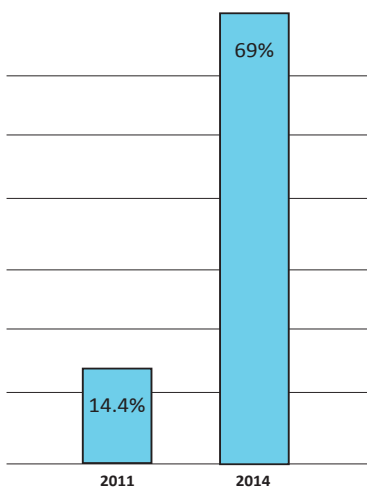


Online Orientation

Student success staffs have employed a variety of strategies and tactics to help them address the challenges their new students face. One of the most notable – and fastest growing – solutions has been the reliance on online orientation software to bolster orientation and transition programs.

The 2011 NODA Databank survey noted that 14.4% of schools responding used some form of online orientation software for new students. Just three years later, the 2014 survey revealed that 69% of schools responding have implemented online orientation as part of their program.

% of Schools Using Online Orientation



% of colleges and universities using online orientation software on their campuses. Based on NODA Databank 2011 & 2014. Numbers reflect percentages based on schools responding.

Online Advantages

Online orientation software programs offer distinct benefits:

CONNECTION – Today’s students are digital natives: they’ve had a lifelong exposure to technology, and online orientation offers them resources in a format they’re completely familiar with.

CONVENIENCE – Regardless of schedules, or traffic, or distance, online orientation programs have the built-in flexibility to be available to students 24/7.

FLEXIBILITY – Online content can be modified quickly and easily, providing students with information that is absolutely current and correct.

DATA DRIVEN IMPROVEMENTS – The data captured in your online orientation program not only lets you monitor and verify the progress of each and every student, it can also help you identify and improve your overall student success services.

DISTRIBUTION – Perhaps the biggest benefit of online orientation software is that it allows you to present relevant orientation content to specific populations clearly, consistently, and in digestible portions, rather than submerging students with information overload.

Dr. Huppe at Collin College has studied the use of technology and social media in communicating with students and orienting them to campus resources. “We have to meet students where they are,” she says. “If they’re on Facebook and Twitter, we need to be on Facebook and Twitter. If they’re comfortable receiving information in an online program, we need to be comfortable providing information in that format.”

Data

Huppe is excited about mining data from her school’s online orientation program. “This is an untapped resource,” she says. “I want to know everything I can about what students are getting, and what students are missing. The data we’re gathering in our online program is going to help us measure the effectiveness of our overall orientation process – and ultimately make improvements that affect student success.”

Cuseo agrees that online orientation programs can aid researchers, faculty and staff by aggregating data that could not be gathered any other way. “Orientation software holds tremendous amounts of data – quizzes, interest inventories, reflections – and we can use that data to reveal patterns and norms. It also allows us to track how our students are progressing on goals so we can follow up with them in-person.”

Social Integration

Online orientations provide another advantage. “High tech can facilitate high touch,” Cuseo says. “The face-to-face orientation time you have with students is limited, and it’s critical. Rather than fill that time with an endless succession of talking heads and information overload that leaves students disengaged and bored, why not move some of that information dissemination to the online component, and replace it with opportunities for social integration and personal validation?”

Again, the question of what to provide and when to provide it comes into play. Many schools only allow access to their online orientation modules after students have successfully completed the in-person orientation. As Cuseo noted earlier, online orientation software offers schools the opportunity to disseminate the tips, reminders

and advice students need – at the specific time of the term or year they need them.

Carrot vs. Stick

“Whether it’s in-person or online,” Cuseo says, “we absolutely need to incentivize students to participate. You may have created a great program, but if it’s not reaching students intrusively, it’s not going to have the systemic impact it could.”

Many schools require students to complete online orientation before they can register for classes, but others are using their online orientation software to augment existing in-person orientation sessions and FYE courses. Fortunately, it’s easy to build incentives into online modules, with inducements for successful completion ranging from priority registration to course credit to bookstore discounts. At Comevo, we’ve heard stories of schools offering iPads or Surface tablets to students who successfully complete orientation.

Target Audiences

Just as more schools are creating in-person orientation seminars for specific groups such as transfer students or foreign students, online orientation software can include components targeted with custom modules that meet the specific needs of those particular groups.

Because the needs of first in family students differ from those of working adults, software can be programmed to provide particularized information and support to those distinct audiences. You can even develop an online orientation component geared for parents and families.

Continuum

“In talking with so many orientation and transition professionals around the country,” says Doug Sawyer, Comevo’s Director of Business Development, “I’ve come to see that there is an orientation event/process continuum that exists, and that each school is in a different place on that spectrum. For us, there’s no right or wrong. Regardless of what particular challenge, objective or orientation philosophy a school has – or where they are on

that event/process continuum – we deliver a customized software solution that can make a tremendous difference.”

“We have the tools,” Cuseo says. “We have research-based answers. However, sometimes, I feel we spend too much time looking for ground-breaking research without fully cultivating the ground of research-based knowledge that’s already been broken. I don’t think we need to wait for more research to guide our efforts as much as we need the will to put existing research into practice. Whether it’s online or in-person, now is the time for folks in our student-centered profession to act as institutional change agents. Let’s mobilize our campuses and lobby for resources to initiate and expand support programs that we know will have significant impact on our students’ success.”



Conclusion

Over 125 colleges and universities throughout North America use Comevo's @school Online Orientation™ software. Cuseo and Huppe (and the vast majority of the orientation and retention professionals we work with around the country) hold the same view of online orientation software that our company does: it is not intended to completely replace face-to-face interactions you have with students, or to provide the in-person social integration experiences students need. Rather, it is designed to be a flexible, convenient, comprehensive tool that benefits both students and staff – a tool that ultimately augments and enhances the success of your school's orientation, transition and retention programs.

Sources

¹ Schlossberg, N. K.; Lynch, A. Q.; and Chickering, A. W. *Improving Higher Education For Adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.

² Braxton, J.M; Hirschy, A.S.; McClendon, S.A. Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure

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National Resource Center for the First Year Experience

NODA Journal of College Orientation & Transition

National Resource Center for the First Year Experience

John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, (formerly the Policy Center on the First Year of College)



About Comevo

Based in San Luis Obispo, CA, Comevo is a leading online orientation and training service provider. Founded in 2007, our company has helped customers in industries such as higher education, manufacturing, food service and tourism take their orientation and training online. Our company's software and customer support services include both standard and multimedia editions with the flexibility to serve almost any industry.



At Comevo, we never stop learning, and we never stop improving. We will always welcome your suggestions on how we can continue to support the work you do.