best practices

Online MBA Orientation Program: Some Best Practices

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The online executive MBA program at Athabasca University's Centre for Innovative Management is celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2004. In that time, we have acquired an excellent understanding of helpful practices for delivering an online, distance education program, and we are continually learning with each new intake of MBA students.

Our MBA program begins with a one-week online orientation course, introducing all incoming students to the online learning environment using Lotus Notes technology, to the discussion databases students use to collaborate with each other, and to techniques for engaging in effective interactions. This article discusses some of the practices that we have developed and used to improve our orientation course and to enhance this initial learning experience for our MBA students.

Athabasca University's Centre for Innovative Management has three program intakes per year, with an enrollment of 80 to120 students per intake. Students are automatically enrolled in the orientation course. To familiarize students with our online learning environment, the course mirrors the format of our academic, eight-week courses. For example, we provide a work plan for the week and set daily learning objectives, and students are expected to complete and submit assignments online. A single instructor or "coach" facilitates the orientation course and is a graduate of our MBA program. Our coaches have a keen interest in teaching as well as reinvesting in the program as alumni. The orientation course is mandatory for students to proceed to the first academic course of the program.

The orientation course has three goals:
- to familiarize students with the technology, the learning medium (customized Lotus Notes databases), and the university's processes so that they can effectively engage with the online course material and their course colleagues
- to provide students with time management and organizational tools and techniques that will help them throughout the program
- to develop students' confidence in their abilities so that they can succeed in a graduate-level learning environment. Students may worry about not being able to keep up with "younger and brighter" students, or they may have concerns about their ability to learn.

Based on these goals, we have developed specific, learner-centered objectives from which we can then evaluate the course.

The student, the team, and the coach

A key facilitator to students' learning is the coach assigned to each small group of students. Our coaches are not "sages on the stage" or "guides on the side," but rather "teachers as coaches." Our coaches are co-inquirers who help students develop their strategic and critical-thinking abilities.

Also critical to the learning process is the role of fellow "team members" within each group of students. To emphasize the importance of learning and working together as a team, each group must develop and gain consensus on a team code of conduct. We introduce students to the code-of-conduct concept in the orientation course, and this activity follows in their subsequent MBA courses. During the initial orientation course, students become familiar with the interaction process by discussing the merits and limitations of case-study analysis within a specific discussion database.

To ensure that our students are actively engaged and learning from the orientation activities, we track and follow up with each student who does not participate within the first week of the orientation course. Previously, this student-tracking process was initiated during the students' first academic course, but we have found several benefits to moving this process into the orientation course. Not only did participation monitoring help us follow up with students who had not yet started the orientation course, but it also helped reduce the number of students who procrastinated in setting up the technology and their databases for the first academic course. As a result, fewer students were playing "catch up" during their initial academic MBA course and could concentrate on the actual learning rather than the logistics of the program. Those students who fell behind in the orientation course were encouraged to review the material on their own. For increased flexibility, the coach remained available to provide assignment feedback for up to a week beyond the end of the one-week orientation course.

Learning styles

Our orientation course includes a short overview of different learning styles such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (*www.athabascau.ca/html/services/counselling/learning/*). We offer material for students to think about how they learn best and tips on how to make the most of their identified learning style. This overview also helps students appreciate that their colleagues may have different learning styles which in turn will help them recognize and embrace various learning styles when working as a team.

Since many of our courses use the case-study method of analysis, we introduce students to this way of learning during the orientation. Students read a short summary on case methodology and its educational benefits. Although the orientation coach has limited time to interact with students during this exercise (as compared to what would occur in an actual academic course), the case-analysis material allows students to discuss and debate the advantages and disadvantages of using cases during group learning. The exercise also allows them to apply some of their newly acquired skills on interacting within a discussion database.

Student writing and research aids

As this is an executive MBA program, most of our students have 10 or more years of managerial experience, and they are very familiar with business writing. However, many of our students are not familiar with academic writing, an important requirement of a graduate-level degree. During the orientation course, we review the differences between business and academic writing and help students understand these differences by providing articles and examples that compare the two writing styles.

Conducting a library search is also a new concept for many students. The orientation course requires students to complete exercises that involve finding educational and business-related articles online and to better understand what a literature review entails (as required for subsequent MBA courses). To assess students' abilities to reference properly, we ask them to submit assignments that require references such as a book, an online article, and a journal article). These orientation assignments

- require students to practice their online research skills by finding articles online

- highlight the importance of time management and effective study skills.

Another important part of the course's writing and research component is ensuring that students are fully aware of the university's academic misconduct policy and introducing students to the importance of proper copyright practices. Students also receive a copy of a published writing guide that focuses on writing skills and referencing, a tool that they use throughout their MBA program.

You can do it!

Over the years, our graduates have shared with us many insights on what they have learned during the program, memorable moments, and words of wisdom for new students. To enable future students to benefit from others' experiences, we developed a short and fun PowerPoint presentation as part of the orientation course that incorporates advice and comments from many of our graduates. In addition, we provide our students with a series of short video clips from actual graduates of the program, commenting on their online MBA experience and sharing helpful advice to inspire new students. Overall, students receive consistent, encouraging advice from the many individuals and materials associated with our orientation course on:

- balancing course work with employment and home life
- participating regularly and frequently in coursework, with quality input
- asking for help when needed
- staying focused on the big picture.

We are continually learning how to better meet the distinct needs of online graduate students, and we hope that what we have learned may assist others in the delivery of online education. Our

approach is very supportive, providing students with a 'toolkit' to better manage the rigors of an MBA program. In summary, we primarily focus on the following activities:

- familiarizing students with Lotus Notes, the course databases, and processes
- providing students with time management and organizational tools and techniques
- helping students develop confidence in their abilities to succeed in a graduate-level learning environment.

As part of the assessment process, we continually ask ourselves, "How are we doing?" At the end of each orientation week, students are sent an online survey that asks them to rate how well the learning objectives were carried out within the orientation course and to share their comments with the course development team. We are in the process of analyzing the results of three recent student surveys and hope to share our results with Distance Education Report readers in the near future.

If you would like more information on the best practices we have developed for this orientation course, we would be happy to share these with you.

Visit *www.mba.athabascau.ca* for more information about Athabasca University's online MBA program.

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