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## Building Community in an Online Graduate Program: Exploring the Role of an In-Person Orientation

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## Building Community in an Online Graduate Program: Exploring the Role of an In-Person Orientation

### Abstract

Orientations help students transition into academic programs. At orientation, students learn how to navigate the university, and access support services, and build rapport with faculty, staff and other students. Few studies have explored the role of orientation in online programs. This qualitative case study explores the ways in which a three-day, in-person orientation impacted students' sense of community in one online graduate program. Findings indicate that providing online students with unstructured, in-person opportunities for interaction helped them develop a sense of community.

### Keywords

Online Learning, Sense of Community, Orientation, Graduate Students, Case Study

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## **Building Community in an Online Graduate Program: Exploring the Role of an In-Person Orientation**

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*Orientations help students transition into academic programs. At orientation, students learn how to navigate the university, and access support services, and build rapport with faculty, staff and other students. Few studies have explored the role of orientation in online programs. This qualitative case study explores the ways in which a three-day, in-person orientation impacted students' sense of community in one online graduate program. Findings indicate that providing online students with unstructured, in-person opportunities for interaction helped them develop a sense of community. Keywords: Online Learning, Sense of Community, Orientation, Graduate Students, Case Study*

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### **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, online education has expanded rapidly (Allen & Seaman, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2013), 32% of American college students have taken an online course, and 25% enrolled in a fully online program.

Despite increasing enrollment, few studies have explored the experiences of online graduate students (Braun, 2008). Particularly overlooked are online graduate students' first year experiences. As the first year is critical to students' success and retention, exploring early experiences in online academic programs is of critical import (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2004).

Studies of graduate students in traditional programs have found that orientation has academic and social benefits (Barker, Felstehausen, Couch, & Henry, 1997; Boyle & Boice, 1998; Pontius & Harper, 2006). For example, Vilsides and Eddy (1993) found that orientation can help graduate students manage anxiety associated with the transition into the academic program. Pontius and Harper (2006) argued that orientation can help students make connections with students, faculty and staff in their department and across the university. Despite the benefits of orientation for graduate students in traditional programs, far fewer studies have considered online graduate students' needs and experiences with regard to orientation (Berry, 2017). In this qualitative case study, I explore how a three-day in-person orientation helped students in one online doctoral program develop relationships with peers and informed their sense of community.

Community, defined as feelings of connection and closeness to a social group, is important for graduate students (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rovai, 2002). Nearly half of graduate students struggle with anxiety and depression, and social isolation can be a contributing factor to these experiences (Stubb, Pyhältö, & Lonka, 2011; Wyatt & Oswald, 2013). Feelings of membership in a learning community can help reduce feelings of isolation and improve graduate students' mental health (Ouzts, 2006). Feelings of membership in a learning community have academic benefits for graduate students as well. Students who feel well-connected are more likely to engage in academics and extracurricular programs and are less likely to withdraw from the academic program (Ke & Hoadley, 2009). As orientation is one of the first opportunities for students to meet peers and develop feelings of belonging at an

institution, it is important to explore how online graduate students' experiences in orientation impact their sense of community.

## **Literature Review**

### **Student Transitions**

Graduate students face several challenges in the entry phase of the academic program (Weidman & Stein, 2003). These challenges include admission, coursework and balance (Gardner, 2009). In dealing with these challenges, graduate students may experience a range of feelings, including anxiety, unease and excitement. Social support networks may help students manage these emotions. Jairam and Kahl (2012) indicated that colleagues, family, and faculty play a vital role in helping provide social support to students. Colleagues can help graduate students manage anxiety and stress related to managing coursework. Family can provide practical support to students, including financial assistance and help with domestic tasks. Faculty can provide professional support, mentoring and guidance to graduate students (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Support networks can also help students navigate the unique challenges associated with being underrepresented in academia (Twale, Weidman & Bethea, 2016). Patton and Harper (2003) and others have written about the role of identity-based support networks for graduate students. Patton (2009) writes that Black women draw on mentors within academia and outside of higher education to deal with racism and sexism inside the academy. Orientation programs can also help students develop supportive relationships and identify resources to help with the transition to graduate school (Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006).

### **Orientation Programs**

Orientation is typically the first formal experience of an academic program. Orientations usually occur before the school year begins or at the start of an academic program (Poock, 2004). They can take several forms, including self-directed web resources that should be completed prior to the academic program, half-day seminars designed to provide an overview of program requirements and institutional offerings, and week-long events that combine academic workshops with social events (Britto & Rush, 2013). The chief purpose of orientation is to educate students about the expectations of a particular academic program and the resources available to support students in meeting those expectations (Poock, 2004). Toward that end, orientations may feature presentations and resources about study skills, academic success and social support (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Literature suggests graduate students benefit from orientations that explore the realities of graduate school, acquaint students with campus resources and allow students to develop relationships within and beyond their home department (Pontius & Harper, 2006). A well-structured orientation can lessen students' anxiety, support acclimation and increase the success of graduate students' transitions into the academic program (Poock, 2004). As graduate orientations can take many formats, it is important for researchers to explore them in greater detail (Britto & Rush, 2013).

While many universities may offer a campus-wide orientation to new graduate students, research suggests that a departmental orientation may offer additional benefits for graduate students. Poock (2004) did a survey comparing campus-wide and departmental orientations and found that department orientations go more in-depth and address concerns that are relevant to new students. Boyle and Boice (1998) have identified departmental orientation as a best practice for enculturation into graduate school. Mears, Scaggs, Ladny, Lindsey, and Ranson, (2015) found that program specific orientations can help graduate students develop meaningful social ties to fulfill personal and professional aims. Additionally, orientations developed by the

academic department can help with socialization into the field, career orientation and post-graduate opportunities.

However, some researchers and practitioners have argued that graduate students are underserved by orientation programs (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Many institutions offer only a cursory orientation for graduate students and focus on logistics rather than deeper issues of campus climate and departmental culture (Gardner, 2009). In failing to explore topics like coursework, candidacy and post-graduate career, Gardner (2009) argued that orientations miss a vital opportunity to provide support for students' adjustment into graduate life. Gardner (2009) and Lovitts (2001) argued that the failure of institutions to create well-crafted orienting experiences for graduate students is a contributing factor to high attrition from academic programs.

### **Orientation in Online Programs**

As with their on-ground counterparts, orientation for distance learners can take many forms, including online modules, webinars and face-to-face programs (Cain, Marrara, Pitre, & Armour, 2007). Just as the orientation experiences of graduate students generally have been underexplored in the literature, only a few studies have considered the role of orientation in supporting online students. Bozarth, Chapman, and LaMonica (2004) and Wojciechowski and Palmer (2005) found that orientations for online students can help students gain familiarity with the learning management system, troubleshoot technical problems and practice interacting with peers in a virtual space. Dare, Zapata, and Thomas (2005) asserted that orientation can help online students develop social relationships. Orientations in online programs have been associated with increased academic engagement (Wojciechowski & Palmer 2005) and retention (Ali & Leeds, 2009).

In addition to providing logistical support about how to navigate the university at a distance, Taylor and Holley (2009) have argued that student affairs practitioners can use orientation to help online students develop peer connections. Dare, Zapata, and Thomas (2005) have similarly argued that student affairs practitioners should become more involved with helping online graduate students form and maintain supportive social networks. Given the variation in online orientation programs, more research needs to be done on how different types of programs support online students' needs (Berry, 2017).

Despite the potential for orientation programs to support online students' successful integration into the academic program, the state of these programs for distance learners remains unclear. Brindley (2014) writes that student support services, the non-instructional resources and programs dedicated to student engagement and success, are both "essential" and "evolving" when it comes to online students. Cabellon and Junco (2015) write that student affairs practitioners need more understanding of the "uncharted territory" of distance learning. Researchers and practitioners are still learning about how computers, mobile phones, social media and other technology impact engagement, satisfaction and retention for students' in on campus programs (Schindler, Burkholder, Morad, & Marsh, 2017). As a result, there is widespread variation in the ways in which practitioners support students who are in technology-based programs (Fontaine & Cook, 2014). Brindley (2014) writes that much of the analysis in this area is anecdotal rather than empirical and calls for more research on how student support staff use technology and other tools to support distance learners.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The concept of community serves as a theoretical frame for this study (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rovai, 2002). A community is a supportive social group. McMillan and Chavis

(1986) identify four core elements of a community -- (a) membership, the feeling that one belongs to a group; (b) influence, the feeling that one matters to that group and can influence its' members; (c) fulfillment of the needs, the feeling that one's needs can be met by the group, and (d) shared emotional connection, the sense of having emotional bonds to group members.

In a learning community, members work collaboratively on shared academic goals (Carlen & Jobring, 2005). In an online program, a learning community can be built through instructor practices and support services (Rovai, 2002). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) argue that faculty who incorporate discussion into their online classes help students interact with peers, which in turn helps cultivate a sense of community. Research by Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004) and Kretovics (2003) suggests that online staff help students cultivate community when they help distance learners utilize resources including the library, financial aid and academic advising.

Orientation programs provide students with academic and social support. The resources shared at an orientation can provide support for thinking about and managing the challenges associated with transition into an academic program (Gardner, 2009). Socially, orientation affords students with opportunities to connect with peers (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Orientations can help students develop a sense of identity tied to a university and develop a sense of membership and belonging within an academic program (Poock, 2004). Because orientations have the potential to help students cultivate the core aspects of a community, including membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection, I theorize that orientations can be a vector for community in online programs.

## **Context**

One of my research interests is how technology can support student success. Toward that end, I am interested in how technology can be used to support student engagement, connection and community. After learning about the growth in online programs, I became interested in the unique experiences of this group of students. My interest in the topic is bolstered by the fact that I am a faculty member in an online graduate program. As a practitioner, my goal is to research and implement practices that support distance learners' success inside and outside of the classroom.

## **Methods**

### **Research Questions**

This paper grew out of a larger study, where the research question was: "What student, program, institutional and technical factors contribute to students' sense of community in an online doctoral program?" This paper explores the role of orientation in impacting online doctoral students' sense of community.

### **Setting for the Study**

The setting for the study was an online doctoral program at a major university on the West Coast that will be referred to by the pseudonym - University of the West. Data were collected from students in a professional doctorate program. The doctorate is in the field of education, but students in the program seek training in organizational leadership in a variety of fields. The program is approximately three years old, and 200 students were in the program at the time of the study. The average age of students in the program is 37. Two-thirds of the students are female. The program is ethnically diverse and includes a significant percentage of

underrepresented minorities. Blacks and Hispanics, who comprise 12% and 8% of graduate programs nationally, are 17% and 34% of the doctoral program at the University of the West.

At the start of the first year, students participated in an orientation hosted by the professional doctorate program. Students flew from across the country and stayed at a local hotel. The three-day in-person orientation was developed by faculty and student support staff in the program. The orientation consisted of lectures led by instructors on academic content, presentations facilitated by staff on the academic, social and psychological support services available to online students and workshops led by technical support teams on how to use the learning management system. The orientation also featured games and team-building exercises for the entire cohort and informal opportunities for students to break into pairs and small groups and have lunch or dinner. Additionally, there were unstructured free times where the students could relax or have private conversations. After the orientation, the students met online two times a week, in synchronous course sessions.

Before beginning the study, I obtained IRB approval. To ensure students' confidentiality, I assigned each participant a pseudonym and removed personally identifying information from the final analyses of data.

## **The Case Study**

I used case study methods to explore the role of orientation in students' sense of community in an online doctoral program. Using case study methods allowed me to draw upon multiple data sources and to triangulate findings (Merriam, 2009). In drawing on multiple sources, I was able to develop a deeper and more holistic understanding of community. Using case study methods also allowed me to incorporate students' perspectives (Patton, 2009). By incorporating and reflecting participant voice, qualitative case study methods allowed me to explore the topic of community-building in online doctoral programs in ways that are not yet reflected in the literature.

## **Data Collection**

Data for this study were drawn from three sources – video footage from six online courses, transcripts from six online message boards, and interviews with twenty students in the online program. In this section I describe how data was collected and analyzed.

The bulk of data for this case study came from interviews with twenty students in the online doctoral program. I conducted interviews for several reasons. First, I wanted to clarify and validate my assertions about the nature of community that I observed via online classes and message boards. Second, I wanted to identify disconfirming cases of community – aspects that were not observable to me as the researcher. Finally, I wanted to learn about community from the students' perspective. Through interviews, I was able to learn how online students' definitions of community supported and conflicted with literature on online community. I was also able to learn about how various elements of the online program, including technology and instructor practices, peer interactions and extracurricular experiences impacted students' sense of community in this particular online program.

Interviews were conducted by phone and lasted around 45 minutes each. The interviews were semi-structured. Using a semi-structured protocol allowed me to gain some consistency across the interviews, while also allowing space for students to share information that they felt important. In interviews, I asked students how they defined community, and to share examples of community. I also asked for specific examples of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) components of community (i.e., membership, influence, fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection). I interviewed ten first-year students and ten-second year students. Findings from

the interviews became repetitive after the 20<sup>th</sup> interview. I determined that theoretical saturation was reached when the same themes emerged across interviews.

The online program consisted of weekly synchronous course sessions. The virtual class sessions were held in an Adobe Connect web conference. The students and the instructor were visible and audible. Class sessions were recorded and archived each week. I analyzed approximately 60 hours of video footage from the biweekly meetings of six online courses. To analyze the video footage, I used a semi-structured observation protocol. The first part of the protocol was open ended and allowed me to write down all of my observations. The second half of the protocol was structured and asked me to document specific examples of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) components of community (i.e., membership, influence, fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection). I completed the first half of the protocol while watching the video footage and completed the second half of the protocol after the observations were completed.

Analyzing the video footage helped me understand the interactions and relationships that informed the online community. Through observations I was able to learn about the frequency and nature of interactions between students. These observations gave me insight into the students' relationships and rapport. Additionally, these observations helped me identify students who were more and less active in the community.

In analyzing footage, I drew upon a purposive sample of core courses. In an attempt to gain maximum variation in my sample, I collected data from three of the required first year courses and three of the required second year courses.

Each of the courses had a message board. In the message board, students could post and respond asynchronously. In an attempt to gain more contextual knowledge about how students interacted with their peers outside of the online classrooms, I collected data from the message boards attached to the six courses. I downloaded and read all of the semesters' posts on the message boards. The boards were used infrequently, and there was about 40 pages of transcripts produced from the six boards.

## **Data Analysis**

The data collection process yielded three types of documents for analysis – observation protocols from the analysis of the archived classroom footage, message board transcripts, and interview transcripts. To analyze these documents, I conducted a content analysis. Content analysis is an analytic method that allows the researcher to build themes that emerge directly from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, content analysis is well-suited to capture unique and underrepresented viewpoints. I utilized Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) directed content analysis method. In this approach, the researcher begins by using theoretically aligned codes from literature and adds to the coding scheme based on what emerges from data. In the first cycle of coding I coded aspects of data that fit with definitions and aspects of community from the literature (i.e., sense of belonging, membership, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection). As I coded, I took note of other themes that emerged from data. For example, in-person meetings, rapport, and offline connections were discussed as important aspects of community in the interviews. I added the new codes to the coding scheme and reanalyzed the data. I then used the coded data to create a thematic description of the ways in which orientation impacted students' sense of community.

## **Limitations**

This case study is part of a larger study on online students' sense of community. Two of the data points—the video footage of the online classrooms and the transcripts from online

message boards—did not give much insight into the impact of orientation on online students' sense of community. Students did not discuss the event in class, save a few message board posts. Still, analyzing the classroom footage gave insight into the context of community. Through this data, I was able to determine that the community was close-knit, positive and highly interactive. I was able to validate these assertions through interviews with students. Another limitation of this study is that I was not able to observe the orientation. Issues of logistics and privacy prevented me from collecting data at the actual event. Still, in interviews with students I was able to gain a detailed, multi-faceted perspective on the ways in which orientation impacted online students' sense of community.

### **Findings**

Many factors impacted students' sense of community in the online doctoral program. Instructor practices, the synchronous video and audio functions of the Adobe Connect web conferencing software used in the virtual classroom and the deliberate efforts of students to connect with peers all helped students in the online doctoral program develop relationships with peers. Findings from interviews suggested that the orientation was also critical in helping students develop feelings of closeness in the online program. The orientation helped students develop a sense of community in three ways: making connections, building rapport, and developing a context for more substantive in-person meetings.

#### **Making Connections**

The orientation held by the education department at the University of the West provided support for students in several key areas. Over the three days, students learned about library and financial aid services, met faculty and reviewed course expectations and graduation requirements. However, the most impactful part of the orientation for all of the students interviewed was the opportunity to make connections with their peers. At orientation, students were able to meet everyone in the cohort. June described this introductory experience as a way to learn about peers and build connections early on.

In my (online) Master's program I don't think I saw any of my classmates face-to-face because there was a ton of people. That is one of the things I really like about this program . . . even though you see some people virtually, we get to see them face-to-face. At the orientation we saw the education building, we had classes in there. We spent most of our time at the hotel there on campus and it was again an opportunity to live the campus life but then the most important part of it was we got to get a little bit more as a cohort. Being able to put the faces to the names and getting to experience the classes as well was great.

For June meeting in person allowed her to make deeper connections with her peers in the online program. For all of the students interviewed, meeting in person allowed them to make initial connections with their cohortmates. One of the greatest assets of this meeting is that students learned about the best ways to make future connections with their peers.

Many students used the orientation to exchange contact information, including phone numbers, email addresses and social media profiles. For example, John, a student who lived 3,000 miles away from the main campus, said that he was able to exchange contact information with almost every student in the 50-member cohort. "It was by exception if I did not get someone's email or phone number at the orientation." John spoke of using this contact information to reach out to classmates throughout the semester, checking in, exchanging

information and building relationships. Without meeting in-person, it would not have been as easy for John and other students to stay in touch with peers throughout the course of the semester.

Other students were more targeted in their approach to connecting with peers at the orientation. For example, Keisha was pursuing the EdD to help switch careers from public sector work to K-12 administration. She spoke of the orientation as a space for her to strategically diversify and expand her network, saying, “I was able to connect with people from different backgrounds.” Meeting in-person allowed Keisha, John and other students to identify peers with shared interests. Students were able to use the information they collected about peers at the orientation and follow up through phone, email and social media to continue these early conversations about career and personal interests.

The connections students made during orientation impacted their experiences over the course of the semester. At orientation, students learned about their colleagues’ backgrounds, skills and interests. The knowledge they gained about peers during orientation gave students fodder for future conversations. Speaking of her experience, Mary said, “I would have private chat with following up with something we talked about in orientation or something we were nervous about or something about the program.” For Mary, the orientation provided a foundation for social interactions over the course of the semester.

The connections made at orientation also gave students insight into who to collaborate with academically. Ashley explained the impact of orientation on her experience during the semester.

When the professor says, “do you have a writing partner?” those (friends from orientation) are going to be the people you ask. You continue building that relationship . . . (after the orientation) those are going to be the people you text every single day.

For Ashley and for others interviewed, the orientation provided the basis for interaction and collaboration throughout the school year.

### **Building Rapport and Supporting Friendships**

In addition to helping students make initial connections with peers, the in-person orientation helped online students develop a sense of rapport with their colleagues. According to student interviews, that rapport was characterized by harmonious interactions, collegiality and a sense of warmth.

The mix of formal and informal activities at the orientation helped students develop this sense of rapport. During the orientation, students participated in formal programs hosted by faculty and staff. For example, there were lengthy introductions and team building activities, where students shared their professional interests, goals and personal background with their colleagues. This type of learning allowed students to strengthen their connections with peers around shared interests and goals. However, the orientation also provided spaces for casual interaction and informal learning as well. Unstructured activities were built into the orientation schedule, and students could grab a coffee or lunch in small groups over the course of the orientation. During these “free” sessions, students were able to learn about each other, strengthen emerging bonds, and develop a sense of rapport. Stacey described it this way:

I think there is a level of informal interaction that happens when you are physically there with other people that doesn’t happen necessarily in an online setting. . . . I think that the orientation did give us a little more personalized

context with each other that we would not have gotten if we started online and had only gone online. So, for example, being able to catch a beer with someone gives you more . . . a different level of comfort with them. It also helped us get to know a little bit about people, including whose got kids, who has teenage kids who has little kids who's doing other things . . . that doesn't always come through in class time.

As Stacey's statement indicates, the in-person interaction at the orientation helped students develop a level of closeness to each other that is difficult to do at a distance. This closeness contributed to a sense of warmth and familiarity amongst peers. Meeting in-person also helped students develop a sense of friendship in the online program. Vicki describes her experience this way:

I think the orientation was essential to us being in the (online) classroom. It helped me feel like a University of the West student . . . and to actually form bonds. A lot of my classmates came from different states so it gave me the opportunity to make friends. These are people that are like my school buddies and so we talk. The immersion also helped me become more comfortable with peer-to-peer learning. I don't think I would be as comfortable with it if it hadn't been for orientation, to be honest. In the past (my previous online program) I worked by myself. . . . I would not have formed connections without the orientation, everything would have been virtual. The trust level would not have been there if we didn't meet in person. We could not have seen who we vibe with or connected with. So I think orientation was essential in that way.

As Vicki's quote illustrates, the ability to meet in person at the start of the online program helped students connect in a more authentic way, which helped students develop a sense of friendship. Observations of student participation in the learning management system indicated that there was a level of warmth and familiarity between colleagues in the online program. Students would log in to the LMS before class started to talk to peers. Students would use the chat room in the LMS to discuss weather, popular television shows, and challenging assignments. They would exchange study tips and provide messages of encouragement. Over the course of the semester, conversations began to center on other shared experiences that were emerging based on the friendships that were forming. For instance, students would often refer to work with writing partners, progress on preparing for midterms, or ideas about gathering information for the dissertation. In the observations, collegiality and camaraderie were observed in the ways students talked to each other. In interviews, students suggested that orientation was the catalyst for the harmonious interactions and sense of collegiality that developed throughout the school year.

### **Developing the Context for In-Person Meetings**

The feelings of community that were cultivated at the in-person session helped influence students' desire to expand the community into future in-person gatherings. In interviews, several students indicated that they met in-person after the orientation. The largest gathering occurred when students in the first cohort organized a group trip to a football game on campus. Ashley, a student affairs director living in Texas, organized a cohort wide trip to the football game as a way to build the social aspect of the community.

When we left orientation we all said “Wow, I wish we had another immersion, so we could see each other again!” Everybody really likes being on campus, it’s a time where we can really just check everything at the door that we have going on and just be students. I thought it would be super fun to go to a football game. I wanted to see a game, I wanted to go to the stadium. I grew up in Texas, where football is huge. There, you just go to the games, it helps you become a member of the school. At the game you are surrounded by thousands of Warriors, so I thought, what better way than to see each other and feel like true Warriors? I just chose a game. I sent a mass email and said, “Hey, if you are interested in going let me know.” I called the athletic department and got a group ticket rate. I set up a PayPal, paid for all the tickets and everyone paid me back.

About a quarter of the first-year cohort came to the game, some bringing children and spouses and traveling over three thousand miles to meet up for the weekend. Once in the city, members met up for dinner and for other social activities before the big game. The game allowed students to reconnect and to continue to build camaraderie. June described it as “really cool and fun. I think that kept the connections alive.” As June’s quote illustrates, attending the football game was a way to reinvigorate the connections that were developed at orientation. Attending the game together also strengthened the connections that students had begun to develop in the orientation, as students got an opportunity to bond with peers in a new space. Attending the game also increased students’ feelings of membership in the learning community. Not only did students feel like they were members of a dynamic and interactive cohort, they began to feel like they were connected to the larger institution.

Of course, not all students were interested in traveling across country to attend the football game, and many were not able to travel due to the cost or to work and family demands. Still, for students who could not attend, knowing that other online students were so interested in developing the social aspect of community that they would make a great sacrifice of time and money was encouraging, and solidified the belief that the online community was as real as an on-ground community would be.

## **Discussion**

In helping students make connections and build rapport, the orientation was a catalyst for community. Students indicated in interviews that without this in-person meeting, cultivating many of the aspects of community identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986), including membership, influence, a shared emotional connection, and fulfilment of needs, would have been difficult to do in an online program. As an early introductory experience that was exclusively for the cohort, the orientation was a space to help students establish feelings of membership within a social group. By providing an extended space to connect with members of this social group, the orientation helped students solidify feelings of group membership.

The orientation also helped to fulfill online students’ needs for social interaction. In interviews, students suggested that they were interested in learning about and connecting with peers. The orientation provided a space to learn a lot about peers, quickly. At orientation, students were able to see their peers in multiple contexts—the classroom, dinner, and one on one conversation. The varied opportunities of the orientation provided students with multiple spaces to learn about each other, fulfilling the need for social interaction in an online program.

The frequent, intense interactions that occurred during orientation helped students establish a shared emotional connection with peers. Students left the gathering feeling like they had begun to develop friendships with their colleagues. Inside of class, this emerging sense of rapport made it easier to communicate with peers in the virtual classroom. Students would use

their burgeoning knowledge of peers to spark dialogue, and the familiarity made class discussions easier. The orientation provided social support necessary to help ease the transition into collaborative learning at a distance. In making it easier to communicate, the orientation positively influenced students' sense of community.

The orientation also influenced students' sense of community outside of the classroom. The orientation helped online students see the possibilities for face-to-face interaction. Students found the orientation to be a fun and supportive experience. In interviews, students expressed a desire to continue to cultivate the community they were developing. After orientation, online students were comfortable with meeting up with their peers, including meeting up for the trip to the football game. The football game both reflected and expanded students' sense of community in the online program. The fact that one quarter of the cohort chose to travel across country to attend the event showed the great connection and influence students felt amongst peers. Students' dedication to this extracurricular participation also reflected a desire for social interaction in the online program. The orientation was the catalyst for this in-person meeting.

The three-day orientation at the start of the school year contributed greatly to students' sense of community in the online program. Meeting in-person allowed students to meet their peers, exchange contact information, and develop a context for future interactions. Students were pleased with the rapport they established and sought to cultivate it more by coming into the online meetings early and staying later to chat with peers. The orientation provided students with a model for offline interaction and showed online students the possibilities for social experiences in a distance program. By providing students with a model for interaction and a space for early connection, the orientation was a vital jumping off point for a robust community for distance learners, online and offline.

### **Implications**

Learning communities do not form organically (Ke & Hoadley, 2009). Early, well-developed co-curricular experiences are instrumental in helping students learn about the program and have positive interactions with faculty, staff and peers (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Kretovics, 2003). A three-day, in-person orientation in an online program was the catalyst for a robust learning community. This orientation allowed for online students to come to campus for three days and to learn about the academic and social facets of the online experience. Students learned about campus resources, including tutoring and technical support, and also learned about their peers. Through games, team building, and unstructured time for casual conversations, students were able to learn about their peers in the online program. By providing a mix of formal and informal learning opportunities, this highly structured in-person orientation helped online students create strong connections with peers.

Graduate students tend to get the short end of the stick when it comes to student affairs programming (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Many practitioners assume that graduate students have the skills needed to make social connections and to integrate themselves into university life, and that they need less support to connect (Pontius & Harper, 2006). Practitioners similarly view online students as self-directed learners who do not need or want support in connecting outside of the class (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). As a result, many online graduate programs tend to be streamlined to focus only on students' academic needs (Dare, Zapata, & Thomas, 2005).

While some online graduate students prefer to work independently and rely on other social networks for support, many online graduate students seek connections within the academic program (Berry, 2017). Because these students lack typical opportunities to connect with peers on campus, online students need support in connecting with peers (Rovai, 2002). It is important for practitioners to shift perceptions with regard to online graduate students, and keep in mind that these students desire to be members in active, engaged learning communities

(Britto & Rush, 2013). Researchers and practitioners should continue to think about the types of experiences that are both feasible and beneficial for online graduate students, but they cannot ignore this group's need for co-curricular offerings to cultivate community.

The findings of this study suggest that administrators and practitioners in online programs would do well to think about how well-designed co-curricular experiences can strengthen online students' sense of connection and community early in the academic program. The orientation in this study occurred during the first month of a three-year program. The orientation set the tone for the interaction and interactivity that occurred throughout the school year. Unlike students in traditional, face-to-face programs, who benefit from constant programming throughout the school year, the students in the online graduate program were able to create their own co-curricular experiences after their initial meeting. Practitioners should reflect on how initial co-curricular experiences can orient students toward connection and community.

The findings of this study also suggest that co-curricular experiences do not necessarily need to be highly structured to be effective for online graduate students. While the three-day orientation featured workshops, dinners and games that were hosted by faculty and staff, the opportunities for unstructured dialogue and informal interaction with peers were the most beneficial parts of the experience for online graduate students. While practitioners are often pressured to fill orientation with resources and informational meetings, practitioners should also consider how unstructured time can be built into orientation. Online students have limited access to peers outside of class. Creating spaces for online students to build rapport with peers is critical to their sense of community. It is worth noting that unstructured interaction does not necessarily need to occur in-person. Practitioners should think about how to use technology, including web-conferencing software, to help students have extended dialogue beyond initial interactions. Practitioners should also consider how to support online students in taking an active role in dialoguing with peers. Whether online or offline, students value the opportunity to connect, and early co-curricular experiences can help them do so.

### Conclusion

For students in one online doctoral program, a three-day in-person orientation helped them develop a sense of community. The orientation helped students make connections, build rapport, and develop a desire for future in-person meetings. The orientation helped develop the four components of community -- feelings of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The orientation was a space where students developed feelings of belonging to a supportive social group. Students' social and emotional needs were fulfilled through the orientation and the subsequent interactions. Over time, peers began to influence each other's behaviors, including the desire to attend a sporting event together. The orientation was a well-developed co-curricular experience that supported online students' engagement throughout the school year.

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