



*Study Results from an Online Student Orientation:  
Using a Community of Inquiry Model  
to Help Students 'Learn How to Learn' Online*

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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-STOUT

*Master of Science in*  
**TECHNICAL and  
PROFESSIONAL  
COMMUNICATION**  
*Online*



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“Online program designed for working professionals”

- 30-credit M.S. degree
- Fully online
- Began in 2009
  - Average student age: 35
  - 70% female
  - 90% working full time

# A problem with student preparedness

## Students are qualified professionals:

- Students possess years of work experience
- Students possess online experience (routinely conduct their work online; completed online trainings)

## Students challenged by graduate work:

- Careful reading
- Extended academic writing
- Connecting theory and research with practice
- Learning in an online environment



# Research about student preparedness and retention in online programs

- Retention for online courses is lower than retention for f2f courses (Levy, 2006)
- Retention for programs attracting non-traditional adult populations is lower than those attracting traditional student populations (Hadfield, 2003)
- Working or playing online is not the same as learning in online environments (Kennedy, 2008; Moule, 2007)



What can be done  
to help prepare graduate students?

Devise an ***online student orientation***  
(OSO) that prepares students for the  
rigors of online graduate work



# Online student orientations (OSOs) contain several common characteristics

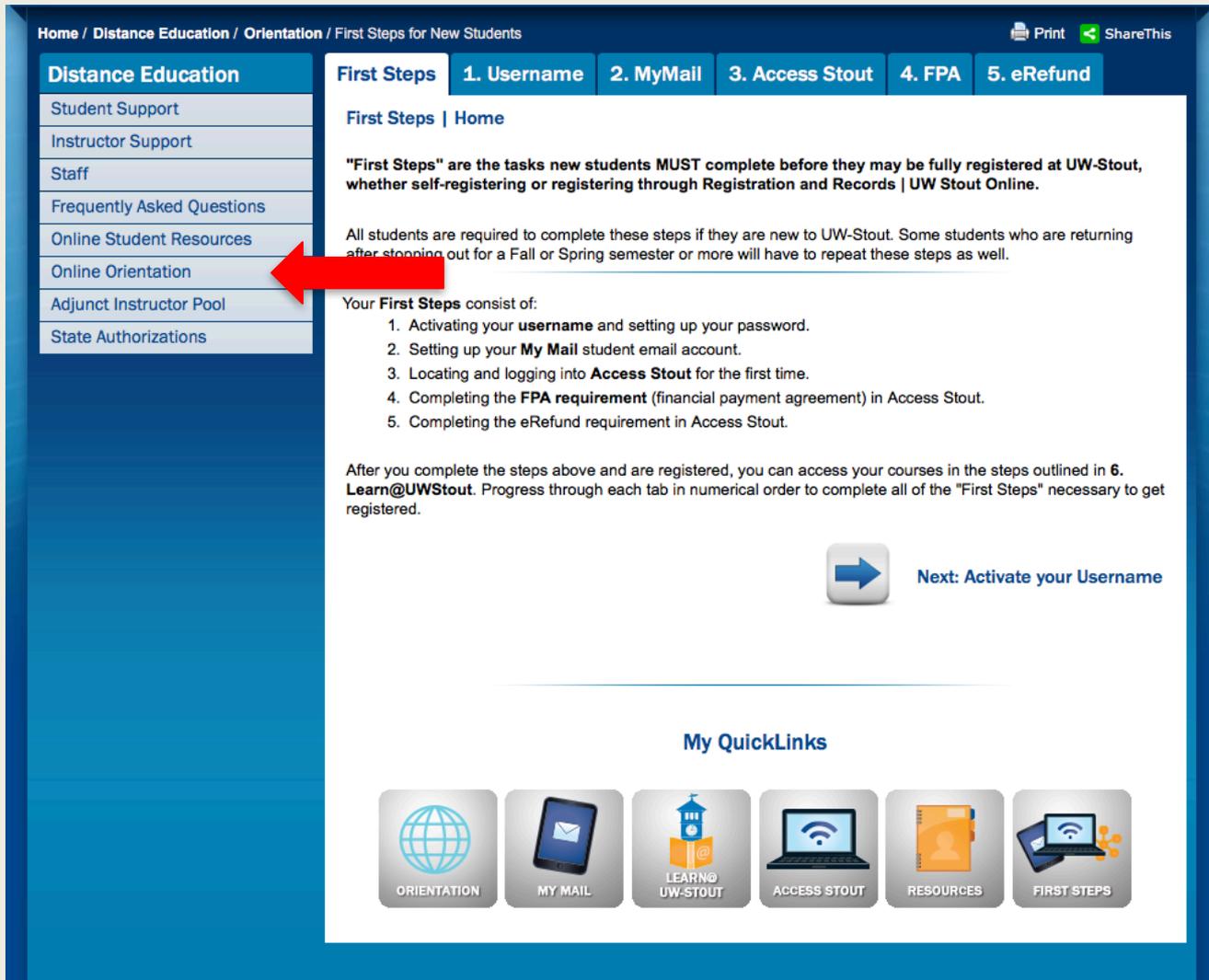
1. Address technological barriers and navigating the LMS (Taylor, 2015)
2. Provide a sense of welcome and familiarize students with campus resources (Jones, 2013)
3. Familiarize students with learning in an online environment (Cho, 2012, Levy, 2006)
4. Help to build peer networks (Smyth, 2012)



# OSOs follow these best practices

1. Pre-semester support as well as support during the initial semester is preferable (Wozniak, 2012)
2. Course-embedded orientations increase completion rates (Taylor, 2015)
3. Orientations should be self-paced (Cho, 2012), activity-based, and provide opportunities for reflection (Wozniak, 2009)
4. To design orientation, analyze student and faculty needs, listen to stakeholder voices, provide quality content (Cho, 2012)

# Current UW-Stout online orientation



Home / Distance Education / Orientation / First Steps for New Students Print ShareThis

**Distance Education**

- Student Support
- Instructor Support
- Staff
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Online Student Resources
- Online Orientation**
- Adjunct Instructor Pool
- State Authorizations

**First Steps** 1. Username 2. MyMail 3. Access Stout 4. FPA 5. eRefund

### First Steps | Home

**"First Steps" are the tasks new students MUST complete before they may be fully registered at UW-Stout, whether self-registering or registering through Registration and Records | UW Stout Online.**

All students are required to complete these steps if they are new to UW-Stout. Some students who are returning after stopping out for a Fall or Spring semester or more will have to repeat these steps as well.

Your **First Steps** consist of:

1. Activating your **username** and setting up your password.
2. Setting up your **My Mail** student email account.
3. Locating and logging into **Access Stout** for the first time.
4. Completing the **FPA requirement** (financial payment agreement) in Access Stout.
5. Completing the eRefund requirement in Access Stout.

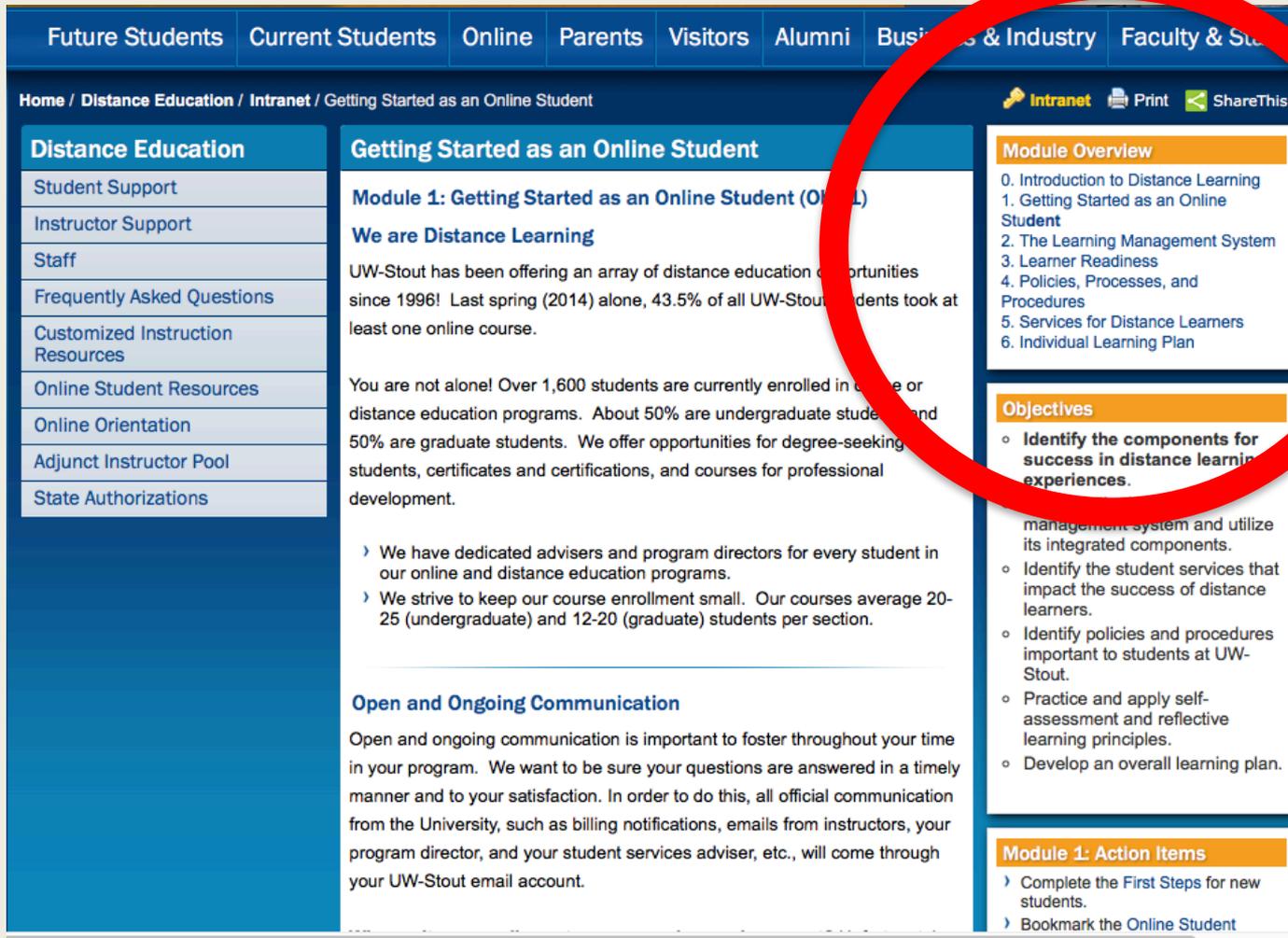
After you complete the steps above and are registered, you can access your courses in the steps outlined in **6. Learn@UWStout**. Progress through each tab in numerical order to complete all of the "First Steps" necessary to get registered.

 **Next: Activate your Username**

### My QuickLinks

-  ORIENTATION
-  MY MAIL
-  LEARN@UW-STOUT
-  ACCESS STOUT
-  RESOURCES
-  FIRST STEPS

# Current UW-Stout online orientation



The screenshot shows the UW-Stout online orientation page. The navigation bar at the top includes links for Future Students, Current Students, Online, Parents, Visitors, Alumni, Business & Industry, and Faculty & Staff. The breadcrumb trail reads: Home / Distance Education / Intranet / Getting Started as an Online Student. The page is titled "Getting Started as an Online Student" and features a sidebar with links for Distance Education resources. The main content area is titled "Module 1: Getting Started as an Online Student (Online)" and includes a section "We are Distance Learning" with a paragraph about UW-Stout's history of distance education and a list of bullet points. Below this is a section "Open and Ongoing Communication" with a paragraph. The right sidebar contains a "Module Overview" section with a numbered list of topics and an "Objectives" section with a bulleted list of goals. A red circle highlights the "Objectives" section.

Future Students | Current Students | Online | Parents | Visitors | Alumni | Business & Industry | Faculty & Staff

Home / Distance Education / Intranet / Getting Started as an Online Student

Intranet | Print | ShareThis

## Distance Education

- Student Support
- Instructor Support
- Staff
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Customized Instruction Resources
- Online Student Resources
- Online Orientation
- Adjunct Instructor Pool
- State Authorizations

## Getting Started as an Online Student

### Module 1: Getting Started as an Online Student (Online)

#### We are Distance Learning

UW-Stout has been offering an array of distance education opportunities since 1996! Last spring (2014) alone, 43.5% of all UW-Stout students took at least one online course.

You are not alone! Over 1,600 students are currently enrolled in online or distance education programs. About 50% are undergraduate students and 50% are graduate students. We offer opportunities for degree-seeking students, certificates and certifications, and courses for professional development.

- › We have dedicated advisers and program directors for every student in our online and distance education programs.
- › We strive to keep our course enrollment small. Our courses average 20-25 (undergraduate) and 12-20 (graduate) students per section.

#### Open and Ongoing Communication

Open and ongoing communication is important to foster throughout your time in your program. We want to be sure your questions are answered in a timely manner and to your satisfaction. In order to do this, all official communication from the University, such as billing notifications, emails from instructors, your program director, and your student services adviser, etc., will come through your UW-Stout email account.

#### Module Overview

0. Introduction to Distance Learning
1. Getting Started as an Online Student
2. The Learning Management System
3. Learner Readiness
4. Policies, Processes, and Procedures
5. Services for Distance Learners
6. Individual Learning Plan

#### Objectives

- Identify the components for success in distance learning experiences.
- Utilize the learning management system and utilize its integrated components.
- Identify the student services that impact the success of distance learners.
- Identify policies and procedures important to students at UW-Stout.
- Practice and apply self-assessment and reflective learning principles.
- Develop an overall learning plan.

#### Module 1: Action Items

- › Complete the First Steps for new students.
- › Bookmark the Online Student

# OSO for my Master's students

## Course-embedded orientation for new MSTPC students

- One week long
- Conducted during Week 1
- Structure the OSO using the Community of Inquiry (COI) theory
- Includes readings, discussion, student interaction
- Embedded in ENGL-700 Theory and Research course, fall semester



# ENGL-700 Theory and Research: OSO

- **Introduce COI**
  - Short video introducing COI
  - Two articles introducing the COI concept
- **Engage students, facilitate discussions about COI, online learning**
  - Reading response questions
  - Discussion board prompt

# The online learning environment can foster deep learning

A Community of Inquiry  
is composed of  
instructors and students

Cognitive  
Presence

Social  
Presence

Instructor  
Presence

Deep learning is possible only with  
cognitive, social and instructor  
presence.

(Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000)

# COI framework emphasizes student and instructor presence

## **Cognitive Presence**

Progresses from lower- to higher-order thinking:

- Issue, problem (assignment)
- Exploration (search for relevant information that can provide insight)
- Integration (connect ideas)
- Resolution (test, apply new ideas)

## **Social Presence**

- Affective expression (share personal expressions of emotion, beliefs, values)
- Open communication (build and sustain trust)
- Group cohesion (interact around common intellectual tasks, activities)

## **Instructor Presence**

- Design and organization (set curriculum, activities)
- Facilitating discourse (shape constructive exchange)
- Direct instruction (focus and resolve issues, feedback)

(Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009)

# What is the value of COI to the OSO?

Student (cognitive) presence, community and teaching presence are dynamically included in this model

- The model is predicated on cultivating deep learning
- Without cognitive presence, deep learning cannot occur
- Instructor presence is key as it facilitates social and cognitive presence
- Cognitive presence cannot be fully achieved without social presence



# Research Questions for the OSO Pilot Study

1. How satisfied were students with the OSO? What modifications did they suggest?
2. How did students use COI to analyze their experiences as online graduate students?
3. What effect did the OSO have on students' abilities to "learn how to learn" online?
4. At what rate were students who completed the OSO retained in the program?

# Methods and Participants

- Analyzed the following materials
  - Pre- and post-course surveys
  - Week 1 discussion board posts
  - Response papers
  - Final exams
- Fifteen students were enrolled and participated in the OSO, 10 females and 5 males.
  - Six students were in their first or second semester in the program
  - six were in their third semester,
  - one was in his fourth
  - two were in their final semester

# Student Satisfaction and Modifications: Surveys

85% of students surveyed found the OSO readings and videos “useful”

- “This course was one of my first online graduate courses. I thought it was a great way to ease into the course and add skills to my ‘toolbox.’”
- “Good for first-time students, but not for ones who have taken several courses.”

# Impact of COI Model: Discussion Board

50% of students 'post-ers' indicated an increase in social presence

- Social presence most frequently discussed COI facet
- Working adult students tend to seek out social presence less frequently or differently than other student groups

(Ke, 2010; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006)



# Impact of COI Model: Discussion Board

- Students noted the importance of building relationships
  - “This is my third full semester in the program and I’m starting to remember and recognize names. But, it reminds me that ***I should be working to build relationships with my fellow grad students*** that span more than one class or one semester.”
- Students connected building social presence with improving cognitive presence
  - “***Assigning thought-provoking questions*** based on assigned readings ... is one strategy ***to include both cognitive presence and social presence***. The higher level questions enables students to think critically and students provide feedback – agreeing, disagreeing, or asking more questions. Acknowledgement from peers enables a student to feel valued in a community of learners.”

# 'Learn How to Learn' Online: Final Exam

While few Final Exam comments pointed specifically to the OSO, one student who spoke directly about COI concepts acknowledged the challenges of online graduate education:

- “In my admissions essay to MSTPC program, I’m embarrassed to say I said ***I was prepared to participate in a distance education program because I had completed computer-based training.*** The two styles of courses are nothing alike. There are no discussions, connections, or critical thinking requirements in a computer-based course. However, college courses — both face-to-face and online — require all of the above.”

# Retention

- 13/15 students were retained into either the subsequent spring or summer semesters
  - 2 students were enrolled in their last semester of the program: they graduated
- This retention rate compares favorably to the 89% overall retention rate for graduate students across my institution during the same time period

(UW-Stout Program Fact Sheet).

# Conclusions

- Pilot study continues with a Year 2 study
  - Created a Week 2 OSO Assessment Survey
  - Streamlined pre- and post-course survey questions
  - Added a mid-semester discussion board about COI
  - Refocused the Final Exam on 'learning how to learn online'

Questions?



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