

MANAGING CONFLICT THROUGH ONBOARDING EFFORTS

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Abstract

This report represents ongoing efforts to improve a redesigned orientation program for graduate Systems Engineering Students. As previously reported by Roberts and Owen (2011), the original orientation, primarily delivered by web-conferencing was traditionally focused on program description, academic requirements, and introduction of key stakeholders and their roles in support of distance education. Recognizing the importance of onboarding, a second phase was added in a redesign of the orientation to teach fundamental skills associated with success in higher education, providing students with information on learning styles, problem solving, and critical thinking. We named that phase of the orientation the Graduate Success Seminar (GSS). A nice spinoff of our redesign efforts provided us with opportunities for discovery. In the process of trying to increase engagement for our students, we as program managers, also became more engaged and discovered additional factors that appear to govern the success of our students. Additionally, we realized that on-boarding exercises should not be confined to the onset of an academic program, but be reinforced throughout the program's lifecycle. Thus, we provided the first-quarter professors and department chair with class profiles of the protocols cited above. As students' progress in their program, virtual team-based projects become more normative, culminating in a capstone project, required for graduation, that is comprised of several teams contributing to the final product. Thus, throughout the lifecycle of a graduate cohort, observations can be made where conflict may be magnified due to the attempts to collaborate and communicate with class members who are dispersed across the country and primarily communicate via web-conferencing rather than face-to-face. As program managers, we believe the behavioral feedback from both perceptual styles and learning styles inventories go a long way to give the students insights into their own behavior and the behavior of others. Additionally, a critical thinking exercise, containing opposing points of view via two published articles, introduces the students to conflict and disagreements that exist in a relatively young engineering field. However, we feel that we need to provide more structured feedback to our students, especially as they progress in their curriculum, on personal conflict styles, and how that information can be used to build a shared sense of purpose, increase team cohesion, and build satisfaction with the team experience. Thus, we plan to introduce an instrument on conflict styles, during the two-week orientation, which we believe will help to address perceptions and behaviors that give rise to conflict and decreased team productivity.

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