The University of Akron School of Law

New Law Student Orientation Online Learning Environment (OLE)

OLE: “Mary Cooke Sandbox” in the [Brightspace LMS at UA](https://id.uakron.edu/idp/profile/SAML2/Redirect/SSO;jsessionid=73C1BB208316AEE6088C55E82A81BE77?execution=e1s1)

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**Description of the Project:**

The University of Akron School of Law Orientation for incoming students needed to be re-imagined. Though we have no alignment standards for orientation, there was much content our Deans believed was important for new law students that they were not getting in the old face-to-face only format. We also followed best practices from orientations other law schools shared with us, and we incorporated the ideas of those of us who have experienced asynchronous and blended courses. Following the ADDIE model (analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation) for instructional design, I prepared a survey that was sent to our students who started in the past three semesters to get their feedback on their orientation experience. I prepared an analysis of our learners and the learning problem, and the Law Student Affairs team determined that a blended orientation “course” would be the most effective way to acclimate incoming students to the academic rigor, professionalism, and behavioral expectations for law students and future lawyers. I then proposed the design and development of an online orientation OLE housed in The University of Akron (UA)’s learning management system (LMS), called Brightspace. The purpose of the orientation OLE is to cover learning and tasks that students can complete before they arrive at Akron Law the week before the semester begins in August. This OLE project is the online component of our New Law Student Orientation blended course at the UA School of Law. Using the Brightspace LMS will allow for student-to-instructor interaction and student-to-student interaction, and these will also occur in the face-to-face sessions of orientation as well.

Law students are only adults, so our learners’ needs have different considerations than those of children. Our learners are college graduates, since a Bachelor’s degree is a requirement to enter law school in the U.S. Law students are characteristically motivated learners. Not all are technologically literate, nor are many familiar with Brightspace nor the databases used for enrolling in classes through My Akron, the interface with the University’s student and employee database. My lesson plan needs to accommodate all levels of adult technological skill and provide the step-by-step process in some modules so new students can accomplish all the tasks required of them before they begin the face-to-face Orientation sessions in August.

**The Impact of TPACK on this Project**

As the American Bar Association recently has approved that a greater percentage of law classes can be offered online, and as technology continues to be used more widely in courtrooms and corporations where our future lawyers will practice, our students need to have the technology and time management skills to learn important content that the asynchronous orientation OLE can teach. Using the TPACK model is the best framework for our orientation course.

TPACK integrates technology to teach concepts in a way that helps students learn more effectively. The content in my OLE for our incoming law students includes some content that needs to be learned, and some content that the students just need to read so they are familiar with the content prior to a live orientation face-to-face event. The modules that have something a new student needs to read for understanding or do to accomplish a task will have learning objectives and a form of assessment and points tied to each module.

The main content portions of the orientation OLE are the Student Handbook, Title IX training (this is an excellent external resource with assessment and feedback in the training), and learning about the Student Center in My Akron where students must enroll in their classes after learning in the module. Following the TPACK model, technology such as videos capturing onscreen steps, linking the external student handbook and Title IX training to the OLE, having an online quiz on the student handbook right within the LMS, and requiring the submission of the certificate of completion of the Title IX training, are ways technology is used to provide seamless content access and assessment. The Student Affairs team will also offer feedback to the discussion board introduction posts and on accomplished tasks to encourage effective learning. These modules will also have learning objectives in the initial description of the module for the students to know their learning goals for those modules.

The modules that are included for the students to view and become familiar with (information on an office or a program offering) will not have learning outcomes or assessments. The purpose of these modules is for the students to read about the office and become familiar with it through this OLE so they will have better retention of the office’s purpose and resources when they participate in the face-to-face orientation event. If students miss the face-to-face event, we will post a video of the event to module 14, “Find All Orientation Videos Here.” They are required to view the entire video (which we will verify in Brightspace) to remove a non-attendance hold placed on their file.

**Design and Development:**

When designing this OLE, I wanted to be sure that students with no familiarity with Brightspace could progress through the OLE simply and efficiently. To do this, I began with a personalized welcome[[1]](#footnote-1) that included the first steps students need to take when entering the course, with the last step in the welcome directing students to where they can begin the numbered modules.

The modules were designed and developed so students can move through the course in a prioritized order, from the most important learning content to information that will be presented in a later face-to-face session of orientation. To assure that students plan well for submitting required documents, enroll in their classes, and complete all the required tasks, I developed a checklist with due dates for all items that need to be completed before the first face-to-face orientation session at the law school. This is the second module, following the Overview module. I also have set up automated reminder emails to send an email to students two days before an assignment or task is due.

For students who want to go above the required content learning and task completion of the orientation OLE, I have included a module on metacognition. This module has tools that students can explore for use with their law classes. To provide guidance on how to use the metacognitive tools most effectively, students are directed to discuss with a member of our Academic Success Program office how to use these tools in the student’s specific law classes. This has the added benefit of more face-to-face contact with the office whose purpose is to help students succeed academically in their law classes and on state bar examinations after graduation.

The final task for students in the OLE is to complete a survey to give feedback on the OLE. This will be valuable after the first implementation to evaluate what was most effective and which areas may need modification in the OLE for future new students.

**Use of This Project with Students:**

Once all the modules in the orientation OLE are finished (we are still waiting on the content from some of our law school offices), all our new law students starting in the fall 2018 semester will be added as students in the orientation OLE. Each will receive an email explaining the new blended orientation course. The email will have step-by-step instructions for students to find this OLE in the Brightspace LMS in My Akron. Again, we do not want to assume that every new student is familiar with technology and the University’s My Akron interface and Brightspace LMS. Students will be directed to enter the orientation OLE and follow all the modules until their checklist in the OLE is completed. The members of the Law Student Affairs team, who have instructor roles in the course, will monitor student progress regularly and provide feedback to the “Introduce Yourself” discussion board posts and other student actions within the OLE. The “Final Tasks” module at the end of the course requires students to complete self-assessment questions and give feedback on the course, and submit their completed checklist. Students will be required to complete the orientation OLE prior to the start of face-to-face events being held at the law school beginning on the Tuesday of the week before semester classes begin.

**Reflection on this Project**

This was a challenging and rewarding project for me. I really liked applying the ADDIE model and the TPACK model to plan this OLE to meet a real student learning need. I took a training course on the Brightspace LMS on campus, which was of great benefit in knowing how to build the OLE in Brightspace. Our Assistant Dean attended a Law Student Affairs conference and came back to Akron Law with new ideas of content to include (specifically the Title IX training module). This OLE was a lot of work and took many, many hours to build, but now we have a good OLE in place that we can just edit for each semester’s orientation.

We expect to see improvement in how prepared our students feel to start law school and in how many students use the resources available to them at Akron Law. We also expect to get feedback that will cause us to modify some of the modules and the OLE for a better experience for future new law students.

1. The Brightspace LMS has several intelligent agents, one of which is being able to automate the insertion of names. I used first names to provide a more personal experience for the student entering the course. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)