

"Evaluating the Remote Onboarding Experience for Student-Facing Staff at a Global, Online University"

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced many organizations to shift their in-person training to remote environments. At a global, online university, this shift had significant impacts on several student-facing support staff (“staff”) onboarding programs. The curriculum, focused on preparing staff to deliver an end-to-end, holistic student experience, includes a range of topic areas, including (but not limited to): conversational skills, program expertise, best practices, technology and systems, and processes. Before the pandemic, onboarding of these staff was held in person, at multiple offices across the United States, with the program primarily being managed at the site level via training specialists and management. This modality allowed for dynamic engagement and learning via peer mentoring, small and large group instruction, and on-the-job training.

In the shift to remote onboarding, all facets were quickly reimaged for online delivery. This significantly impacted the learner experience and outcomes in many ways. Programs that were once siloed across sites were now melded into a series of disjointed sessions. The loss of in-person engagement created isolating and often inconsistent learning experiences. The spontaneity of speaking with or receiving just-in-time coaching with a team member, trainer, or manager in the office was minimized. Training staff and management now had limited visibility into the progress of newly hired staff as well, often relying on scheduled check-ins or chat messaging to gauge progress or answer questions. A sense of company culture was also lost; yet instilling and promoting culture during onboarding is critical to a positive, staff experience. Over time, administration of the program became cumbersome, with staff changes and a decentralized model for training contributing to several overarching programmatic issues.

It became clear over time that strong, organized onboarding programs were critical to bridging the gaps and issues resulting from the necessary shift to an online modality. As a result, in fall 2022, the university established a dedicated team focused on the learning and development (“L&D”) of its student-facing staff. Spanning across teams that support the student lifecycle, this L&D function is positioned to impact a more holistic student experience. To do so, a priority initiative of this newly formed L&D team was to evaluate and revise the staff onboarding programs.

Program evaluation is critical in the field of instructional design but often becomes an afterthought in consideration of more pressing priorities in curriculum design and development work. However, the continued cycle of program evaluation and revisions is necessary to maintain learning experiences that are timely and relevant. In spring 2023, a project team began a full evaluation of the onboarding programs designed for its student-facing support staff. During the initial discovery sessions, it became clear that the process would be more complex than originally thought. Three years of significant changes – including shifts in learning and development support, closed offices,

and a pandemic – negatively impacted curricula, logistics, processes, and other critical aspects of these programs. The goals of the instructional designer leading the initiative were clear: to hear the voices of stakeholders, understand their needs and concerns, find gaps in the current state, and make recommendations and a plan for an improved curriculum design and programming.

In this session, key members of the project team will share their approach to the program evaluation process for this initiative. Specifically, presenters will focus on:

- The stages of the program evaluation process, including the design, the intentions behind the design, and the outcomes.
- The importance of developing strong stakeholder relationships and the role of stakeholders in the evaluation process.
- Strategies to maintain a positive corporate culture in online onboarding programming.
- Wins and opportunities uncovered throughout the program evaluation process.

Overall, this session will highlight the critical need for effective program evaluation in adapting remote onboarding. Emphasizing stakeholder engagement, preserving the positive company culture, and leveraging lessons learned, it will provide essential insights to enhance the success of onboarding evaluation initiatives.