



# American University





## Perspective



a discussion with  
Jennifer Johnson  
*Director of Orientation,  
Transition and Retention*



AMERICAN  
UNIVERSITY  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Hundreds of higher education institutions across America and three countries are using Advantage Orientation® to support new students during the onboarding experience. This cloud-based platform has been most effectively deployed upon admission and used to help students and their families stay engaged and confident throughout the enrollment process. One of these institutions is American University (AU) in Washington, D.C., a private, mid-size institution serving both undergraduate and graduate students.

The new student orientation program at AU was originally structured to provide students with an online orientation in advance of an on-campus event. With the online orientation already in place, administrators used it as their “textbook” to guide the transformation of their hybrid orientation program to a total virtual experience.

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## Real-Life Experience

This case study discusses the goals, strategies, tactics, and impact of using Advantage Orientation® as a comprehensive solution to providing an interactive and media-rich digital experience in support of successful transitions.





## Goal

*“As eager as I was to help support graduate students, I was also thinking about how I could use online orientation to support existing orientation programs.”*

When starting her new role as Director of Orientation, Transition and Retention at American University in Summer 2016, one of Jennifer Johnson’s first assignments was to provide general campus orientation content to graduate students. Each school and college handled graduate orientation differently and each focused almost exclusively on academics. It became obvious that adding more time and more sessions to an on-campus event was not a viable option.

After meeting with the Graduate Leadership Council, Jennifer leaned on her familiarity with Advantage Design Group® (ADG) at George Mason University (her former institution) and decided the company’s Advantage Orientation® was the way to go.

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## Key Strategies

“As eager as I was to help support graduate students, I was also thinking about how I could use online orientation to support existing orientation programs,” Jennifer recalled. She was also thinking about how to rally her colleagues around the project.

Her experience had taught her several key strategies:

- The sooner students and their families receive relevant information upon admission, the better.
- Unique student populations engage more with a personalized experience.
- Online orientation fills a critical gap when in-person events aren’t possible or when students (and their families) engage late in the enrollment process.
- Accessibility is everything.
- You need a true production partner.
- You don’t get support if you don’t ask.



## Considerations

### Campus Partners

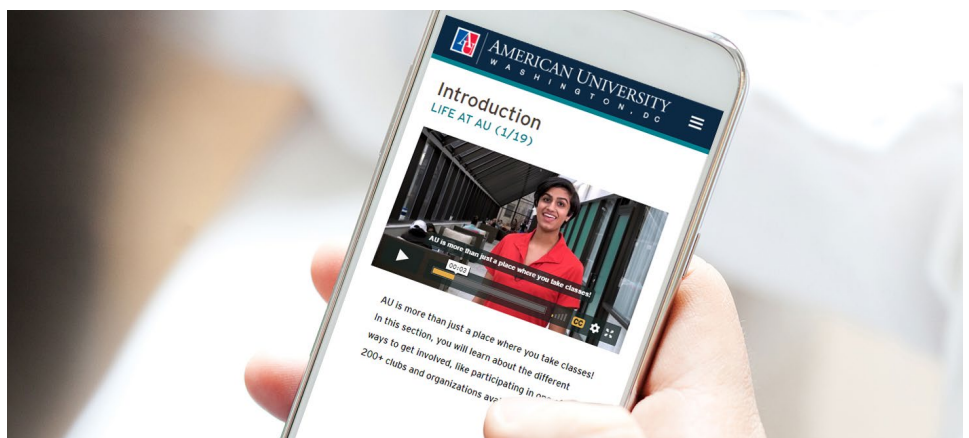
Confident that online orientation would be beneficial to more than just graduate students, Jennifer reached out to other university offices and asked for letters of support for her budget request to fund online orientation.

She received letters from offices that support International Students, Veteran and Military Students, and Law Students, as well as Parents & Families. Actively participating in the RFP process, she wrote a proposal for the university Office of Information Technology to fund online orientation based on Advantage Orientation's features and capabilities, especially as it pertained to accessibility.

### Build It for Access

While her online orientation meets current Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1, level AA), accessibility is more than a technological requirement. She used a focus group of colleagues and students to test accessibility and adaptability.

For Jennifer, **financial and location accessibility** are equally important considerations. On-campus orientation at AU is a fee-based program and in the past, only about half of students attending orientation registered a guest to bring with them. Through online orientation, students and their families, wherever they are, have access to orientation for free and it is continuously accessible to them as a digital resource and reference tool.







## Creativity

“Advantage Design Group® are pros at what they do and gave us wonderful recommendations along the way to personalize the product to AU.”

“Working with Advantage Design Group® was a smooth and well-coordinated process,” Jennifer said. “They are pros at what they do and gave wonderful recommendations along the way to personalize the product to AU. They were extremely responsive, organized and well-staffed. They went above and beyond our expectations.”

Jennifer’s ADG project manager set up a kick-off meeting for her and other stakeholders to ask questions, communicate creative preferences, and understand the project timeline. The process began with sharing photos, videos, web pages, and identity standards with ADG digital designers to inspire their approach and reinforce their understanding of the AU Brand. “Our students tend to be a little more serious and straight-forward, so we wanted the online orientation to reflect that,” Jennifer said.

The first production milestone was selecting the right interface design. Jennifer was presented with three, unique concepts. “We requested minor modifications by choosing the best aspects of the concepts we liked,” Jennifer recalled. From there, the team focused on content development and video production.

Jennifer led content development which was initially structured across seven modules in a guided and linear framework. Because she had chosen to integrate the platform with AU’s student information system, she was then able to target relevant content for unique student populations to further personalize the experience. New, undergraduate students, as the largest populations, are the primary audience and additional, population-specific content is served to graduate students, doctoral candidates, transfer students, and military/veteran students.





## Technology

Students entering in the fall can access online orientation in early March and those entering in the spring can begin online orientation in late November. Modules introduce students to Academics, Support Services, Life at AU, Financing Your Education, Policies & Safety, and Next Steps.

“Now that we are up and running, we occasionally need to help a parent or family member retrieve their account credentials. Other than that, there have been little to no disruptions,” Jennifer said. To keep information current, Jennifer’s office reaches out to campus partners, reviews user feedback and analyzes system reports to make changes twice a year. Jennifer rates the editing panel as “very intuitive,” making content changes quick and easy.

### Year-to-Year Participation Comparison

Jennifer is pleased with the number of **students choosing to participate in online orientation** even though it is not required.

Within a year of launching their online orientation, student groups participating in orientation programming from the year before has **tripled and even quadrupled**.

Student populations most “appreciative” are international students and graduate students who generally do not arrive to campus until August.

		Participation	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Percentage Increase
All Students	Started		722	1888	^161%
	Completed		368	1223	^232%
Graduate Students	Started		285	455	^59%
	Completed		173	294	^70%
Veteran Students	Started		47	81	^72%
	Completed		28	58	^107%

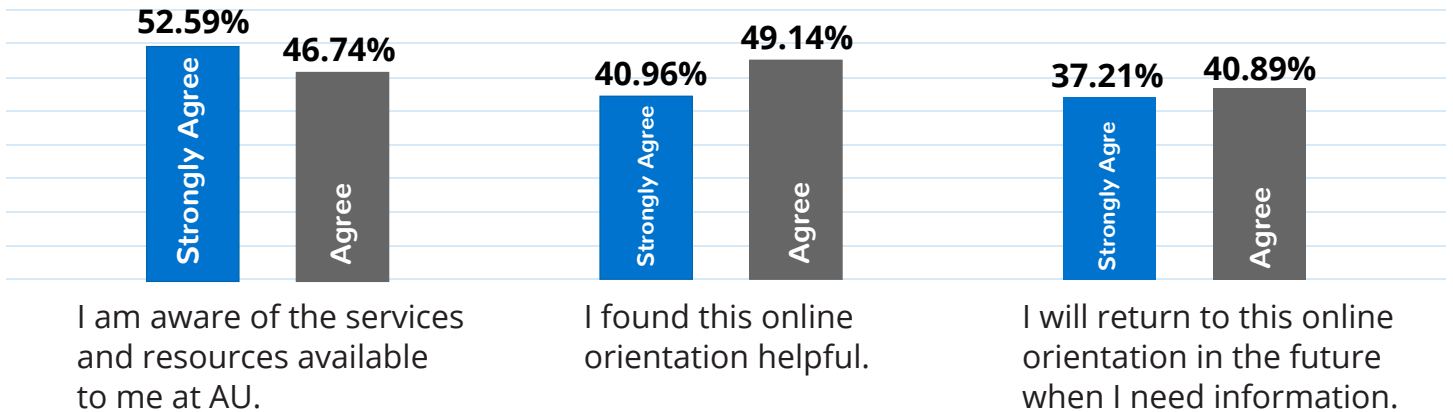




## Results

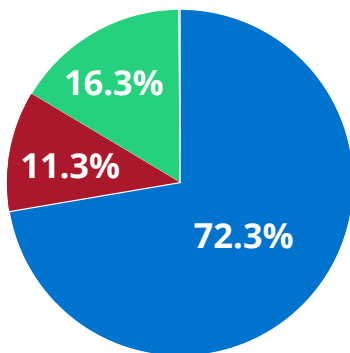
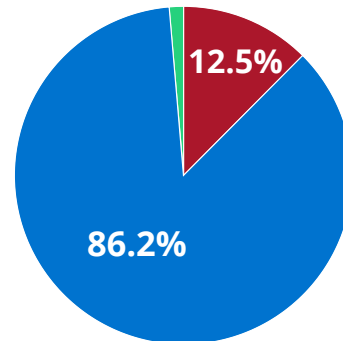
### Student Satisfaction

Along with other assessment tools built into AU's online orientation, Jennifer uses survey responses to understand what students take away from the experience. These responses were captured April 1 - October 1, 2019.



In my opinion, the online orientation was

- Too long ●
- Just right ●
- Too short ●



What did you find most convenient about the online orientation?

- I was able to take it anytime I wanted.
- I could take it anywhere I wanted.
- I was able to take it using my personal electronic device.





## Going Forward

“I see this as an opportunity to deliver ‘just-in-time’ content to provide support over the student’s life cycle.”

With the positive student feedback and collaborative relationships with campus partners, Jennifer and her team are exploring ways to innovate the onboarding experience at American University. By leveraging the platform’s usability, adaptability and cost-effectiveness, they can move forward with confidence to improve the student experience and staff efficiency.

AU’s business school has already added a module for its graduate students. Given the system’s user-friendly management tools, administrative duties will be de-centralized by assigning access to a stakeholder of each student group.

Because students are attracted to online orientation and willing to participate in it, Jennifer is whiteboarding the idea of extending the platform’s application beyond enrollment and orientation. “I see this as an opportunity to deliver “just-in-time” content to provide support over the student’s life cycle,” Jennifer said.

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### About Advantage Design Group®

Advantage Design Group® is a multimedia production and software development firm established in 1998. This certified, woman-owned small business is the largest online orientation production company in America, employing over 40 full-time staff. The company’s diverse talent includes digital specialists in art direction, UX design, programming, video production, content development, project management and training.

Advantage Orientation®, the company’s cloud-based orientation software, is currently deployed by hundreds of higher education institutions in three countries. The platform provides an interactive and media-rich experience to support successful transitions for new students and new hires.

Visit [AdvantageDesignGroup.com](http://AdvantageDesignGroup.com) to request a live tour.

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