

The release of HTML5, she says, also made making programs interactive much easier—a key element the team is using to make the orientation a more engaging tool. For example, “I can take a map of campus and make it interactive: ‘Find our international center.’ They can find it and get it correct,” Lampner says. “I can basically do all kinds of cool interactive actions and it’ll run on any browser.”

That sort of intricacy would have taken hours to do years ago, she says, and would have required a technologically savvy person to create it. Now, she can teach a less tech-savvy hire to do the same in relatively less time.

But for all the bells and whistles, practically speaking, for incoming English as a second language students, captioned videos and simply the ability to slow down speech may be the most valuable parts of the orientation. Instructional designer Ling Qian, who is part of the team designing the orientation, says that aspect of the tool spoke to her as an international student who came to the United States from China just two years ago.

“In online orientations, I can choose to slow down the speed, or watch as much as possible to fully understand,” she says. “In a physical space, I feel bad if I stop the instructor and ask questions, but in the online one I can [take the time to] really understand. I can Google things. It’s very convenient for second-language speakers.”

With that convenience, Kille is hoping to use the orientation as a yield tool as well to help excite students before they arrive—increasing those who come to campus and decreasing those who back out. Last year, Akron saw about 300 international undergraduate students arrive and, Kille says, she’s hoping to push the number closer to 400, as the university courts more students from abroad.

Using Tech to Address a Challenge

The online module concept Akron is riffing on comes in many forms. At the University of Michigan, two projects funded by grants from the provost’s office are intentionally being left public as a potential resource for those even beyond the university.

The first is a recently completed website called Resilient Traveling designed to help students with mental health issues associated with travel. “We’re individually working with and seeing more students having challenges while abroad,” says Katie Lopez, assistant director of the University of Michigan’s Office of Global activities. “Instead of just being reactionary, we’re being proactive in talking about these potential issues.”

Lopez, working with Kelly Kowatch, the director of the Office of Professional and Community Engagement in the School of Information, and a large in-house team spanning several other University of Michigan schools, chose to address mental health

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through a website in part because they wanted something accessible to students before, during, and after traveling abroad.

The School of Social Work will maintain the website going forward—something planned early on, Kowatch says. “If you don’t have the sustainability question answered [from the beginning], it’s not a worthwhile project,” she says.

Following the Resilient Traveler website, the University of Michigan is now working on another open access resource: a MOOC on community engagement abroad. The project similarly began as a way to address a specific problem. Lopez had seen that the university had about 30 student groups working in international communities and repeatedly asking the same questions.

The MOOC, housed on EdX, will feature five core modules covering topics related to project management, social identities, and collaborative leadership to help those working in community engagement abroad. It is designed to answer the specific questions of a traveling student or, for those interested in the entire five-module course, it offers a certification. Lopez expects it to launch in 2018.

Dealing With Data

With each new module or orientation, new social media account, or database portal, new information is gleaned from users.

Metrics can be pulled on who is using which systems and at what time of day. And as data accumulates, systems administrators can tweak what they’re doing to better serve students. At its most basic, that can take the form of trial and error on social media posts. If a post doesn’t play well, staff can reframe it and try again.

But while the ease of accruing data may help systems to be more effective, it can also yield way too much information. In a university setting, more information hardly sounds like a bad thing but it risks obscuring the most helpful trends. For Christina Trombley, the executive director for Drake Online at Drake University, the answer lies in identifying the purpose of the data. In other words, she says, it’s about “identifying what’s really interesting compared to what I need to know to make decisions.”

In practice it looks something like this: “If we see that the majority of our students are signing on [to an online program] after 6 p.m. at night, does that tell me I need to switch my operations? Do I have technical support after 6 p.m. at night? If I don’t, is that problematic?”

Knowing what information is useful can be challenging when just beginning a project—or, in the case of Vermont, an entire electronic checklist designed to make it easy to see which students have done which task. “You want to make sure you’re catching everything, but no one has time to do that or the resources really,” Trombley says. “When you’re first starting out, even I still have to fight against that tendency to just run reports to feel like I’m on top of everything.”

Knowing the Purpose of the Data Can Help

At East Carolina University, Whitney Morris, the coordinator of faculty-led study abroad, is gathering information with that in mind.

She’s doing her dissertation, using pre- and postcourse data-gathering with students in the university’s Global Understanding course, which was recognized with a NAFSA Senator Paul Simon Spotlight Award in 2016. She’s looking at what effect the course has on the students’ self-reported intercultural competency. The results could help the university adjust the course.

Since launching in 2003, the course has used teleconferencing to link students with universities overseas for a few weeks at a time. Then the students will switch to another country. Right now, East Carolina has 42 international partners. “As technology has advanced, they’ve constantly been using new [technologies],” Morris says.

That’s true of more traditional study abroad programs at the university too, where simply connecting through Facebook or teleconferencing is allowing students to meet before ever boarding a plane. “Starting those connections prior to departure, those students are familiarizing with their fellow participants with their host culture,” Morris says. “Once they get there, hopefully they’re more prepared to experience what they’re about to experience.”

At one predeparture meeting for students heading to Nicaragua, students told Morris they were going to use WhatsApp to share information. At another meeting, a different group told her they’d use GroupMe. She’d never heard of the text message platforms, but she’s trying to be open to the changes—in the same way that universities ask students to remain open while traveling abroad. In the end, it will make for a more rewarding trip on both counts.

“If you look at 10, 15, 20 years ago, a lot of these technologies didn’t exist,” Morris says. “The world is becoming more connected. And sometimes you just have to listen to the students and see what they’re using.” ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Social media statistics round up:

<https://www.bluecorona.com/blog/social-media-statistics-2017>

EdTech Review’s social media in education round up:

<http://edtechreview.in/data-statistics/2523-social-media-in-education-statistics>

Educause’s Technology Research in the Academic Community:

<https://www.educause.edu/ecar/technology-research-academic-community>

The Chronicle of Higher Education’s “The Digital Era”:

<https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/50-years-of-technology>

NAFSA’s Technology Member Interest Group site:

<https://nafsatechmig.com/>

EdTech Magazine:

<https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/>

University of Michigan’s Resilient Traveling site:

<https://resilient-traveling.umich.edu/>