

# Welcoming New Graduate Students During COVID: Lessons Learned from Assessing a Virtual Orientation

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## Context

In August 2020, the in-person New Graduate Student Orientation (NGSO) at a large, R1, public university was restructured to be delivered in a completely virtual environment for the first time in orientation history due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The presenters evaluated the online orientation to highlight the successes and areas for improvement. The findings provide insight for future virtual orientations at large universities.

## Evaluation Questions

- 1) To what extent were the students able to easily use the online portal for the virtual orientation?
- 2) To what extent did students feel prepared for their first year of graduate studies after attending the virtual orientation?
- 3) What were students' suggestions for improving future virtual orientations?

## Methods

Advanced Survey Branching

Quantitative

1) I felt welcomed to the university after attending this session

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Qualitative

How can this session be improved for future orientations?

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## Methods in Action

Welcome and Introduction Session	n	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
I felt welcomed after attending this session	108	78%	3%	19%
This session helped me understand the procedures in maintaining safety during the COVID-19 pandemic	108	81%	6%	13%
The GSS presentation helped me identify different opportunities to get involved on campus	107	65%	7%	27%
I learned about where to find information on upcoming professional development opportunities	108	83%	4%	13%

“ Make it applicable. It felt very juvenile and content light.”

“ Include more info regarding starting at UT as a brand new student.”

“ I was bummed that we had to choose sessions to go to and miss others.”

“ The live Q & A session did not work with my browser multiple times ”

“The grad student panel needs some diversifying”

“ I think that the UT welcome video lacked diversity and was lackluster in representation ”

“ This orientation was missing a lot of the basics of getting to know a new campus.”

## Findings

### Successes

#### 1) Pivoting from in-person to virtual orientation

Staff **adjusted programming quickly to continue to meet the needs** of incoming graduate students. Attendees noted their appreciation to still deliver the same content over a virtual format

#### 2) Clear NGSO communication

**97%** Reported receiving clear instructions on registering/log-on using the online portal

#### 3) Useful breakout sessions

The **overwhelming majority** of students reported that the information provided will help them have a **successful first year**

## Findings

### Improvements

#### 1) Explore other online platforms

Portal was **difficult** to log-on, navigate, and use **live Q&A function**

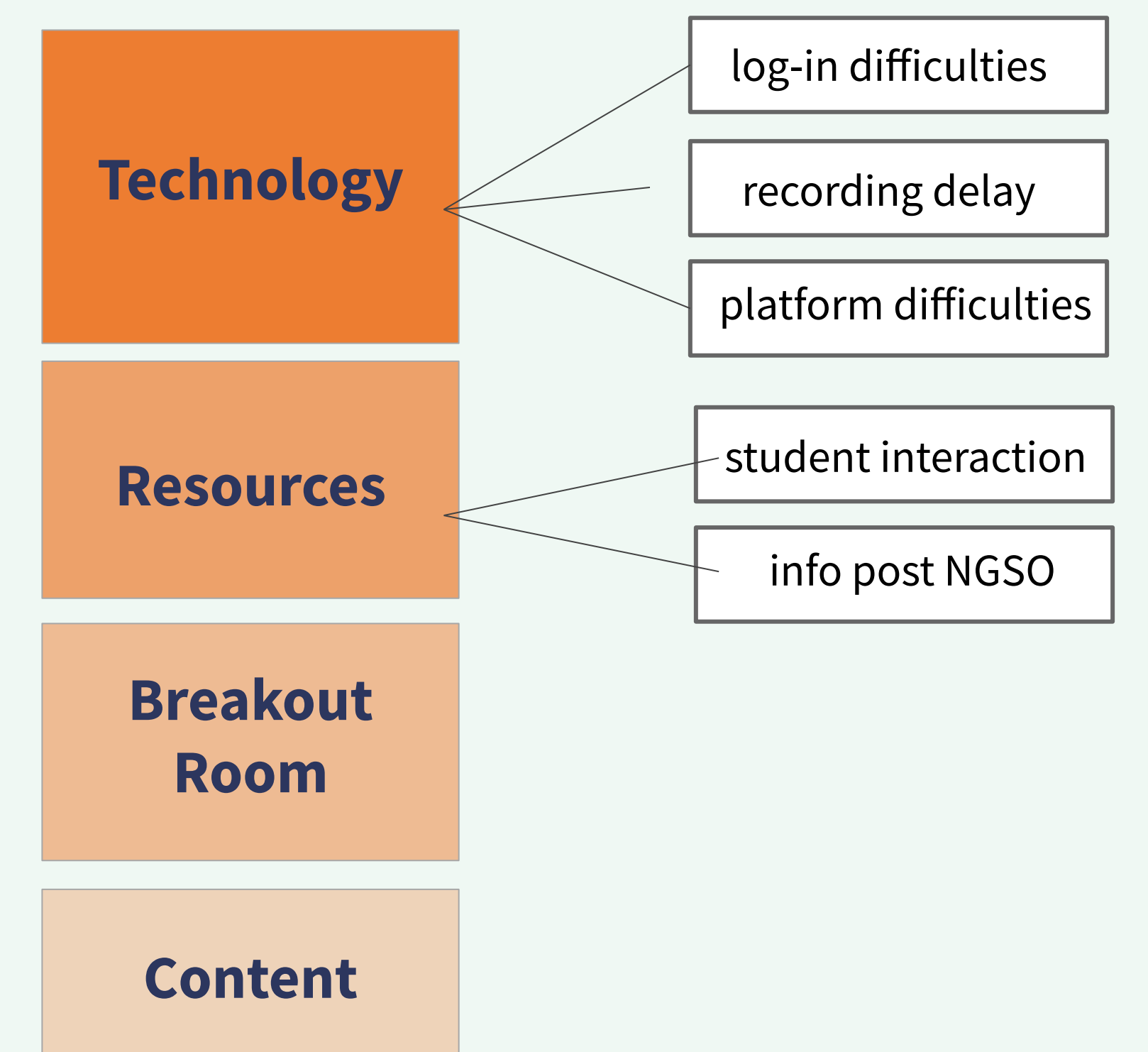
#### 2) Increase student interaction

Plan **optional breakout sessions** or activities to **foster engagement** among new students

#### 3) Provide additional resources

**Summary** of resources covered during orientation (e.g., student services, resources, etc.)

#### 4) Increase breakout room capacity



## Future Recommendations Research

### 1) Immediately send survey

- The decision to evaluate this orientation was delayed, so the participants did not receive the survey immediately

### 2) Advanced survey branching

- In order to reduce survey fatigue, branching was used to only show participants questions that were relevant to the sessions they attended

## Future Recommendations Practice

### 1) Promote interactivenss

- Utilize breakout rooms and polling throughout the orientation, and in a post pandemic setting, continue to have in person social events in the days following orientation

### 2) Explore virtual options

- Continue exploring virtual options when planning future orientations to provide flexibility and accessibility to students