

# **Using the Web to Provide New Faculty & Staff with Employment and Benefits Information**

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## **Abstract**

The University of Georgia (UGA) in Athens, Georgia, employs more than 17,000 benefit-eligible, temporary, and student employees scattered throughout the state, nation, and world. To provide timely, accurate, and consistent employment and benefit information to its distributed workforce UGA began providing orientation on line in January 2000. Now, all new UGA faculty and staff, regardless of work location, receive the same information from Human Resources. New employees (more than 9,000 since its inception) benefit by being able to access online orientation immediately after receiving an offer of employment, at a time convenient to them, then progress through orientation at their own pace and revisit as often as necessary. UGA benefits from the innovation by providing consistent information for both on- and off-campus employees, updating information instantaneously, and reducing waste by distributing only the forms required by each employee. Response has been overwhelmingly positive. UGA's online orientation has been used as a model for public and private employers throughout the country, has garnered awards from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), and was featured in Human Resource Executive Magazine and CUPA-HR Online. It was also featured on CUPA-HR's effective practices Web site in 2002.

# **Introduction to The University of Georgia**

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The University of Georgia (UGA) was founded in 1785 and is America's oldest state-chartered university. UGA is located in Athens-Clarke County, Georgia, about 70 miles northeast of downtown Atlanta. Clarke County is one of the 23 contiguous metropolitan counties of North Georgia.

UGA is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award Associate, Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctor's degrees. In addition, a number of the individual University departments, degree programs, and service functions are accredited by appropriate professional organizations.

UGA offers 20 Baccalaureate degrees in 176 major fields, 27 Master's degrees in 149 fields, 22 Educational Specialist degrees, 4 Doctoral degrees in 109 areas, and Professional degrees in law, pharmacy, and veterinary medicine. UGA is comprised of 14 schools and colleges: Arts & Sciences, Law, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Pharmacy, Forest Resources, Education, Business, Journalism and Mass Communication, Family and Consumer Sciences, Veterinary Medicine, Social Work, Environment and Design, Graduate School, and Public and International Affairs.

The UGA library has more than 3.7 million volumes and houses one of the nation's largest map collections. The main campus includes 338 building located on 605 acres. Total acreage in 31 Georgia counties is 42,064 acres. Student enrollment exceeds 32,000. UGA's annual budget exceeds \$1.1 billion. UGA employs over 9,600 benefit-eligible faculty and staff and another 7,600 student and temporary employees.

*U.S. News and World Report* magazine's 2000 "Best Colleges" edition ranks UGA 18<sup>th</sup> among national public research universities. Kiplinger's magazine ranks UGA 15<sup>th</sup> on its list of 100 public institutions that provide the best "bang for the buck." The ranking is based on such factors as total costs, average amount of student debt at graduation, in-state tuition, graduation and retention rates, and average standardized testing.

Sources: UGA Fact Sheet, [http://www.uga.edu/uga/facts\\_figures.html](http://www.uga.edu/uga/facts_figures.html) and  
UGA By the Numbers <http://www.uga.edu/news/bynumbers/index.html>

## **Statement of the problem/initiative**

The University of Georgia (UGA) employs more than 9,600 benefit eligible employees and another 7,600 temporary and student employees scattered throughout the state, nation, and world. In order to provide timely, accurate, and consistent employment and benefit information to its distributed and diverse workforce, in 1999 the UGA Human Resources Training and Development Department (T&D) began reviewing its method of disseminating information to new faculty and staff. For years, UGA had offered live orientation sessions consisting of an introduction to the university, employment and benefit information, and required Right to Know training. The live sessions were

conducted on the main campus in Athens by Human Resources staff and provided via video and written materials to off campus locations. Unfortunately, the half-day sessions often overwhelmed new faculty and staff, yet barely scratched the surface of what they needed to know. Because video production was time-consuming, the video content was often outdated shortly after production. The accompanying orientation packet contained over 30 items: handbooks, policies, employment and benefits forms, and other miscellaneous campus information. The cost and challenge of keeping orientation materials updated, a static budget, and the ongoing need to provide timely information to a dispersed workforce, required a change.

## **Design**

In hopes of finding an already established online orientation program to use as a model, Training and Development researched numerous other institutions of higher education and private and public employers. Finding no other employer using the Web for orientation, UGA developed its online program in house based on the design of the live sessions. Developing online orientation at UGA was a collaborative effort. Training and Development staff led the effort and worked with staff from the Employee Benefits Department and Environmental Safety Division (ESD) to produce a comprehensive Web-based orientation program that would meet the needs of all UGA faculty and staff regardless of their job title or work location.

Although faced with a multitude of decisions during the development process, five overarching considerations influenced the design of UGA's online orientation program.

### **1. Technology limitations of users**

Because UGA is a large public institution, some campus units do not have the latest computer equipment. Additionally, newly hired employees are encouraged to go through online orientation as soon as they accept an offer of employment. Many elect to do this from home, where they access the Internet by slower modems. Consequently, in designing online orientation, T&D intentionally omitted video and audio streaming and other advanced features requiring higher end technology.

### **2. Computer skill level of users**

With a diverse workforce with varying levels of computer skills—from expert to none, the online orientation program was designed in the most simple and straightforward way possible. Checklists are included to insure participants do not miss critical information. Once logged into online orientation, navigation consists of merely clicking on arrows to move forward in a linear fashion.

### **3. A diverse audience**

Current literature on adult learners supports efforts to provide self-directed and self-paced instructional methods when appropriate (Craig, 1987, MacKeracher, 1998, and Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Based on feedback and observations from the live orientation sessions, T&D recognized the programs did not meet the needs of all participants. Many orientation participants indicated the sessions were too long, while an equal number felt overwhelmed by the vast amount of information they had to absorb in such a short period of time. Additionally, it was necessary to take new faculty and staff out of their workplace to travel to the

Training and Development Center, forcing them to cope with navigating confusing bus routes or traffic and parking on a large campus. Because of the mixed comprehension levels of the audience, including persons who did not speak English as a first language and persons with disabilities, the pace of the live sessions was often modified based on the needs of just a few participants. Because of the lecture and video format, there was little opportunity for self-directed learning. Allowing employees to progress through online orientation at their own pace insures they will be able to better comprehend the complex information as well as revisit it as often as necessary.

**4. Structured progression so no information is skipped**

Because UGA is required by state, federal, and Regents mandates to provide specific information to new faculty and staff, the program's linear format discourages participants from skipping policy and procedure information (thus reducing institutional liability). To test the success of the design, during December 1999, online orientation sessions were conducted at the Training and Development Center computer labs so T&D staff could observe participants with varying levels of computer and reading skills as they progressed through the program. Even the most inexperienced computer users were able to progress on their own with minimal instructions once logged into the program.

**5. Limited development and maintenance resources**

Because additional funding was not provided for development of online orientation, it was necessary to use existing resources, including staff, software, and hardware, to accomplish the task. Four departmental staff members—the

Webmaster, a personnel specialist, the network manager, and department director—comprised the development team. The personnel specialist led the project team, contributing significantly to the design and development and the Webmaster handled the majority of the technical design. Although detailed records were not maintained, it is estimated that T&D staff invested approximately 785 hours over a 6-8 month period during the development, beta testing, and campus education phase. Approximately five hours per month are required in ongoing maintenance and troubleshooting. The following software packages were used by the development team—Adobe Acrobat, Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Pagemill, Netscape Composer, and CGI script.

## **Implementation**

The online orientation team began work on the project in mid 1999. A beta test group reviewed the program in the fall of 1999 and provided helpful feedback. From the instruction page, both supervisors and employees can print checklists to guide them through the orientation process. A concise benefits summary is included online but employees also have the option of meeting with benefits counselors at biweekly benefits overview sessions to discuss UGA benefit choices in greater detail. With some apprehension and a great deal of planning, development, and eagerness, UGA began providing orientation online in January 2000. For the first time, all new University of Georgia faculty and staff, regardless of work location, receive consistent and timely information from Human Resources. Since its debut, more than 9,000 benefit and non-

benefit eligible employees have participated in online orientation. Response to the program has been overwhelmingly positive.

## **Benefits for new faculty and staff**

New faculty and staff benefit from online orientation by being able to:

- Access orientation at a time convenient to them and their supervisors
- Access information immediately upon receiving an offer of employment
- Progress through orientation at their own pace (most complete it in much less time than the live sessions)
- Revisit as often as necessary, from home or work, to review policies and gather information about campus and benefits available to them
- Share benefit information with their spouses, even when separated logistically
- Arrange for translators in advance if English is not their first language

## **Benefits for the institution**

In addition to the numerous benefits for new faculty and staff, the institution benefits from online orientation as well because the program allows T&D to:

- Provide consistent information to both on and off campus employees
- Update information instantaneously when policies, benefits, and other information changes
- Reduce waste by distributing only the forms required by each employee
- Insure all employees are able to receive information at their own pace and

comprehension level

- Insure nothing is omitted (which can occur with live sessions)
- Free T&D staff time and needed training space for other professional development classes

## **Retrospect**

The University of Georgia's online orientation is a win-win arrangement and has been embraced by the majority of new faculty, staff, and supervisors. To assist supervisors in providing proper departmental orientations for newly hired faculty and staff, in spring 2000, T&D introduced a new training program entitled, *Giving New Employees the Right Start*. Plans are also underway to offer a new instructor-led program to complement online orientation and acquaint new faculty and staff with UGA's *Partners for Excellence* initiative and culture. Free from regulatory and paperwork requirements, this new program can be upbeat and interactive. Individual and institutional response to online orientation has been overwhelmingly positive. To quote one previous, and recently rehired UGA employee, "The online orientation is great. Things have improved so much since I left UGA two years ago!"

## **References**

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