

DRAFT: First Year Student Success – Summer Orientation Working Group

Recommendations

1. Develop Personalized Orientation Pathways for Diverse Learner Groups.

Currently, orientation messaging and events are either one-size-fits-all or student driven a-la-cart. Students and families receive little guidance on deciding which activities will be most beneficial for their unique situation. The committee recommends developing personalized orientation agendas and communications to guide students of various backgrounds and needs into educational and social programming which will support them as individuals.

2. Invest in Training and Resources for Academic Departments and Divisions

Orientation activities are designed to both educate the student and help them make their college choice decision. Positive, consistent and professional experiences across campus help prospects understand why the University of Maine is their top choice. Many academic departments lack resources for developing robust orientation materials and lack training to answer non-academic student and parent questions. The committee recommends developing a training program to aid departments in developing their own orientation knowledge-base and promotional materials.

3. Adapt Navigate Platform for Use at Orientation Activities

The Navigate platform represents a monumental opportunity to communicate with admitted students. As the platform is launched and integrated, the committee recommends it be adapted for orientation scheduling and communications.

4. Investigate & Adapt the Full Suite of Orientation Communications and Events to Reinforce Key Goals

Because orientation begins several months prior to the start of courses and involves dozens of communications from many different offices, the committee recommends that staff time be dedicated to fully reviewing all pre-enrollment communications to ensure that each touch-point adds value on the student orientation journey.

Background

Launched in 1923, the University of Maine hosts the nation's oldest summer orientation program (Packwood, 1977). Over the last 96 years, the University of Maine program has evolved from a week of welcome activities prior to the launch of the fall term into a suite of communications, activities, and events geared toward preparing students and families for their entrance into the higher education environment.

In Fall 2018, a committee was formed from faculty and staff representatives campus-wide to investigate the current state of summer orientation activities at the University of Maine, to explore best practices, investigate national benchmarks, and to develop a set of goals to guide how orientation can be leveraged to improve first year student retention at the University. The purpose of this report is to demonstrate the value of orientation activities for the student, the family, and the institution; identify opportunities for improvement in the current University of Maine program; and to recommend future investments to further support students at the University of Maine.

What is Orientation?

Orientation refers to both the physical summer overnight orientation event, and the conceptual suite of knowledge and social preparatory activities organized to serve as a transitional bridge into college entrance. Each touchpoint within the orientation suite serves to develop 1.) campus skills, 2.) personal growth/ developing social connections, or 4.) related parent and family services. At the University of Maine, this suite of orientation activities includes:

- Pre-admission reminders and communications
- Admissions Offer packet
- Financial aid award communications
- Accepted Students day
- Social media engagement (FB/Insta, Nearpeer)
- Auxiliary Services Communications (housing, bookstore)
- Summer Orientation Communications
- Student Employment Communications
- Summer Orientation events
- Greek Life communications
- Options Trips
- Housing Communications
- Maine Hello/ Parent Newsletters
- Co-curricular and academic trips
- Fall Welcome Weekend

The University of Maine's three pillar orientation events (Accepted Student Day, Orientation, and Welcome Weekend) represent a robust, efficient and adaptable foundation from which to explore new opportunities to benefit learners.

Why Orientation?

Learners who engage with pre-collegiate orientation activities both enroll and persist at higher rates than those who do not. Undecided students who attend orientation activities at the University of Maine are more likely to deposit and enroll. Students who engage with orientation activities report higher levels of social connectivity and familiarity with institutional services than those who do not. Additionally, students with informed, supportive families are more likely to persist. Given the value of a robust orientation enterprise to a student's success, the suite of

orientation materials, communications, and activities all serve to support students and families as they move into higher education.

Orientation programming has three purposes for students, families and the institution: 1.) helping students and families understand key services such as counseling or tutoring resources 2.) creating pathways for the student to with the institution & develop social connections, and 3.) support and educate parents and families on their new role.

Grounded in best practice recommendations from the National Orientation Directors Association and decades of related research, the committee developed a set of goals to guide the development or re-development of University of Maine Orientation activities. The three overarching purposes of orientation were further subdivided into a number of measurable individual goals. In this graph, each individual orientation activity has been coded on its intersection with the overarching themes and sub-goals. For example, Campus technology skills are addressed when the student receives their Financial Aid package and at Summer Orientation, but lacks representation at other points in the timeline. Overall, some goal areas are well developed and represented throughout the orientation timeline, while others require additional support. In all, this graph paints a picture of the University of Maine's strengths and weaknesses in current orientation practices.

Critical Touch Points:	Pre-Admission Comm	Admissions letters	Financial Aid packages	Accepted Student Days	Near peer Sign-up	Aux Services Communications (Books, health, housing)	Orei/ Navigate email	Student Employment Email	Summer Orientation	Greek Life Emails	Options Trips	Housing Roommate Mailing	Billing mailing	Maine Hello/ Parent Newsletter Out	Co-Curricular/ Academic Trips	Welcome Week end
GOALS OF ORIENTATION																
Campus Skills																
Connect with student populations				X		X			X			X				X

with diverse needs (IEPs etc)																
Understand available services/ resources/opp ortuinities		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Understand the registration/ add drop etc							X		X				X			X
Understand how to use campus technology			X						X							
Become familiar with Campus environment				X		X	X		X		X	X			X	X
Understanding Financial Aid/ Student Employment		X	X	X				X	X			X	X			X
Personal growth																
Develop independence - begin to take responsibility for their education	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Define the purpose of their education - Understand why these particular courses are important and how they tie in/ what to expect									X							X
Acclimate to the campus culture				X	X	X			X	X	X				X	X
Connect with the University		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X
Connect with other students				X	X		X		X	X	X				X	X
Parent and Family Resources																
Help parents of student populations				X					X					X		

with diverse needs (IEPs etc)																	
Help parents to understand admissions/ academic calendars				X		X			X					X			
Help Parents Understand Financial Aid/ Billing Process		X		X		X		X	X			X	X	X			

Each orientation activity, communication, and touch-point can serve to fulfill one or more of the sub-goals, all of which work together to help students and families understand what to expect and where to go for help. Recommendation three, *investigate & adapt the full suite of orientation communications and events to reinforce key goals*, refers to the need to ensure that each pre-collegiate touchpoint fulfills one of more goals. A full assessment and alignment of all orientation materials to the orientation goals will ensure that learners and families are given multiple opportunities to develop skills and connections.

In addition to admissions and auxiliary service assessments, academic departments and divisions should also be given the opportunity to examine and rebuild their materials, presentations, and pre-matriculation engagements with an eye toward aligning their activities to the overall orientation goals. This aligns to recommendation four, *invest in training and resources for academic departments and divisions*.

Who Participates in Orientation?

Student pathways into higher education are evolving. The orientation needs of entering students can range from a traditionally aged students entering soon after high school graduation to off-cycle adult learners re-engaging after several years out of the educational system. Students may be entering college with several semesters of Bridge or AP credits. Students may enter into

an online-only, hybrid, or campus based environment. Students might be traveling from across the globe, or might have socioeconomic backgrounds which diverge from the majority of the student body. Additionally, parents and families of entering students require information, communication, and a sense of security around the student's college choice. Given the diversity of student and family needs, orientation programming should to be adapted for multiple learner types and modalities.

Recommendation one, *develop personalized pathways for multiple learner groups*, responds to the diversity of orientation needs, both encompassing student types and recognizing the importance of parent and family orientation as well. By leveraging existing information about the incoming class, the University of Maine can custom tailor orientation experiences to the needs of each individual student. This custom agenda can be enabled through application of recommendation three: *adapt Navigate platform for use at orientation activities*. Rather than giving students a menu of options and opportunities with little guidance on how to select programs from amid the options, students could be presented with a suite of curated activities to meet their individual needs.

Conclusion

The University of Maine boasts a long history of successful orientation programming. By examining national best practices, benchmark institution programming, and our internal resources, the committee developed a series of goals to guide the assessment of current orientation practices. In turn, that assessment revealed some weaknesses which can be developed through four key investments:

1. Develop personalized orientation pathways for multiple learner groups.

2. Invest in training and resources for academic departments and divisions
3. Adapt Navigate Platform for use at Orientation activities
4. Investigate & adapt the full suite of orientation communications and events to reinforce key goals

It is the belief of the committee that our work is not complete – orientation is an ongoing, iterative process which requires constant reassessment and yearly improvements to adapt to changing student and family needs.