

First Year Student Success – 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 the fall of 2018, a committee was formed from faculty and staff representatives 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 orientation investments to further support students at the University of Maine.

Resulting from this investigation, the committee has developed four recommendations to guide the future development of orientation activities at the University of Maine. These

recommendations include the development of a personalized orientation pathways for diverse learner groups, investment in training and resources for academic departments and divisions, adaption of the Navigate platform for use at orientation activities, and aligning the full suite of orientation communications and events to reinforce key goals.

What is Orientation?

Orientation refers to 1.) the physical mid-summer overnight Orientation event, and 2.) the conceptual suite preparatory activities organized to serve as a transitional bridge into college entrance. 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 (i.e. Glass & Garrett, 1995 ; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Pascarella, Terinzini, & Wolf, 1986). Students who engage with orientation activities report higher levels of social connectivity and familiarity with institutional services than those

who do not (Mullendore & Banahan 2005). Additionally, students with informed, supportive families are more likely to persist (Coburn & Woodward, 2001; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 2000; Tinto, 1975). 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.

Grounded in best practice recommendations from the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) 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. Based on this research, the committee has determined that orientation programming has three main purposes for students, families and the institution: 1.) to help students and families understand campus services and resources 2.) to create pathways for the student to engage with the academic program, the institution and peers, and 3.) to support and educate parents and families of incoming students.

The three overarching purposes of orientation were further subdivided into a number of measurable individual goals. In this graph, each orientation touchpoint has been coded for its intersection with the three overarching purposes and various sub-goals. For example, campus technology skills are addressed when the student receives their financial aid package and at summer orientation, but lack representation at other points in the orientation timeline. Overall, some goals are well developed and represented throughout the orientation timeline while others require additional touchpoints. This graph illustrates the University of Maine's strengths and weaknesses in current orientation practices.

9. Acclimate to the campus culture				X	X	X			X	X	X				X	X
10. Connect with the University		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
11. Connect with other students				X	X		X		X	X	X	X			X	X
Parent and Family Resources																
12 Help parents of student populations with diverse needs (IEPs etc)				X					X					X		
13. Help parents to understand admissions/ academic calendars				X		X			X					X		
14. Help Parents Understand Financial Aid/ Billing Process		X		X		X		X	X			X	X	X		

Each orientation activity, communication, and event should fulfill one or more sub-goals. The sub-goals combine to help students and families understand what to expect and where to go for help. Currently, some sub-goals are not fully realized within the suite of touch-points. 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 multiple goals. A full assessment and alignment of orientation materials to the goals will ensure that learners and families are given multiple opportunities to develop skills and connections. This recommendation represents an investment of time and energy from all departments to review and update any materials, communications, and face-to-face encounters

they exchange with incoming students and families in the months between admission and the start of classes.

Currently, academic departments vary widely in the quantity and breadth of events and communications they exchange with incoming students. Yet, the academic department is among the students' most robust ongoing institutional relationships (Drake, 2011; Lotkowski, et. al., 2004). From the family's first tour of classroom and lab space, to accepted student day talks given by faculty and current students, to sitting down with an advisor for registration, to the first day of classes, the academic department is the core of the student's educational journey. As such, the department has a unique orientation role to fill in helping students and families with their transition to higher education. For example, sub-goal eight, "Define the purpose of education - Understand why these particular courses are important, how they tie in, and what to expect" is an essential component of orientation that should be emphasized within the department. Currently, departments often do not have the resources to prioritize the development of robust orientation activities and communications. This aligns to recommendation four, *invest in training and resources for academic departments and divisions*. Academic departments require additional support in understanding how to develop meaningful orientation activities and communications. This support could come in the form of investments in departmental staff and funding to develop orientation activities, or it could be a campus-wide "best-practices" training for all departmental faculty and staff involved in the orientation process.

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 and development of current orientation practices. In turn, that assessment revealed 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.

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