

## **The Impact of a Comprehensive Model of New Student and Family Orientation on Student Success**

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In order to better integrate incoming students to CU's campus culture and improve their academic and social success, campus should adopt a more comprehensive new student orientation model. A comprehensive approach would begin during the summer before a student arrives and extend through the first year. Components of this approach would include required in-person programming, additional bridge programs to serve more students, more in-person programming for parents and families, and required first-year experience courses that help students to become successful college students. Integrating students into the social and academic fabric of an institution is key to their retention and success (Tinto, 1987). A comprehensive new student orientation program facilitates student learning in three general dimensions: transition processes, academic integration, and personal and social integration.

The transition to college is stressful for both students and their families. The stress can cause students to drop out before they have a chance to adjust. Information and a commitment to the institution can reduce the amount of stress a student feels. Comprehensive orientation programs foster this knowledge and commitment by:

- Setting the tone for student expectations.
- Providing opportunities for students to connect with other students. Students who participated in overnight programs at CU in the previous model of orientation reported creating lasting friendships with students they met during the program.
- Providing an opportunity for students to connect with faculty or staff that care about their success at college.
- Providing students with their first exposure to the academic rigor and requirements of an institution. Establishing realistic expectations for the amount of effort and work required to be successful is invaluable. Students and families often arrive with misconceptions or outdated information about how college works. Addressing these misconceptions can prevent early errors and disappointments.
- Providing an opportunity for students to navigate the physical environment.
- Beginning to establish a culture of safety. Campuses can create a safer environment and establish a culture of bystander intervention in a group setting which reinforces the content in a way that online modules do not.
- Teaching students to navigate processes like course registration, as well as explaining university policy and procedure.

I propose a comprehensive orientation module that would include these components, additional bridge programs targeting special populations, summer over-night visits for all first-year students, an in-person parent and family orientation, and first-year experience courses that reinforce and deepen the learning that begins during summer orientation.

We need more summer bridge programs designed to meet the unique needs of specific populations of students and to provide in-time support to at risk groups. Past studies show that students of color on mostly white campuses are likely to view their environment as unsupportive, which leads to difficulty in their social and academic integration (Fleming, 1984). Latinos at primarily white institutions face

specific stresses associated with their minority status. First-year students in particular exhibit considerable psychological sensitivity to actual and perceived instances of micro-aggressions and discrimination (Smedly, Myers, and Hanell, 1993). A study of Michigan State University's summer transition programming showed that first-year students developed a deep sense of connection during the program. This connection led to students feeling that their skills would meet academic demands and that they would fit into the college community, both of which positively impact retention. The study found that this was particularly true for members of underrepresented populations. For universities that are looking to foster a diverse student body, this is an avenue that we can act on now. We can use the summer before students arrive on campus to develop a sense of "fitting in" (Prasad and Henion, 2017). Bridge programs have been shown to improve academic self-efficacy as well. Positive beliefs about one's own academic skills have been shown to positively predict first semester grades.

Developing connections and confidence before beginning college is important for all first-year students. On-campus programming should be available to all incoming students and should be mandatory with flexibility for special circumstances. Our online orientation alone does not foster feelings of connection and commitment and is inadequate to the task familiarizing new students and families with important CU policies and requirements. Orientation programming should occur during the summer and should not be held during welcome week programming. Students and families should have an opportunity to learn about campus and ask questions without the added stress of move-in and separation challenges. The time between summer programming and move-in provides families the time to digest a large amount of new information and to formulate thoughtful follow-up questions and to plan for the transition. Online orientation does not provide opportunities for students to connect with faculty or staff. We know the impact on a student's retention of a relationship with a professional who cares about their success. These types of relationships cannot be developed through email communications.

Students do not make connections with their peers to create a sense of community before arriving on campus without an intentional in-person summer program. Students have been known to form online groups, but not every demographic has access to the same level of technology and online groups are not necessarily inclusive. Online groups can create online communities but they have not been shown to create communities "IRL".

A critical part of the transition process for students is the involvement of their families (White, Goetz, Hunter, and Baufoot, 1995). Parents have a strong desire to learn about the institution and want opportunities to get answers to questions that are important to them. The lack of in-person orientation programming for families to address the unique concerns of parents means that parents resort to calling multiple departments on campus for support. Parent orientation can also provide for a formal separation process for families as parents have a desire for a "goodbye" experience with their new college student. Parent programming gives institutions an opportunity to set expectations for appropriate interactions between families and staff of the institution. Students and families who participate in a comprehensive orientation program feel confident about their choice in an institution. As a result they feel a greater commitment to that college.

The challenge of course registration can be addressed during bridge and in-person summer programs. Currently, students can self-advise with or without fully reading the content in the Online New Student Welcome Experience. Successful completion of the required online modules does not indicate that a student was actively engaged with and understands the material. A large percentage of the incoming

class successfully completes the required quizzes without knowing next steps, how to use the registration system, or what courses are appropriate for their major and interests. Frequently students will only spend a few minutes in each of the advising and registration modules before they take the quizzes. Students can make an appointment with an advisor to get help with registration, but caseloads are such that many students will not have a full length appointment before they have to register for classes. If a student is on top of it enough to make an appointment a good portion of the meeting is spent helping students to understand and navigate the registration system. Advisors have to trouble shoot common errors that could be addressed by presenting to students in a large group setting. The online modules and frequent messaging from campus departments has not reduced the need for additional support for both students and parents around course registration processes. Advisors and other CU support staff become de facto orientation providers but are inadequate to the job with student caseloads at their current numbers. The result for students can be poor course selection and a lack of knowledge about institutional policies, requirements, and resources on campus.

We should add required First-year experience courses that introduce students to campus resources and develop college readiness skills such as note taking, time management, and effective study habits, as these have been shown to positively impact a student's academic success. Schnell and Doetkott (2003) and Boudreau and Kromrey (1994) examined student success courses in four-year institutions and found significantly higher retention for participants than for similar non-participants. Studies also found a positive relationship between course participation and academic performance. If our first-year courses move beyond relationship-building and information-giving to provide opportunities to learn and practice the skills and habits for college success, the effects will be extended to positively impact graduation rates as well (Karp et al., 2012). The campus should support the creation of first-year experience courses that promote applied learning, reflection, and intentional practice.

Data suggest that there is value in using multiple interventions to help students to navigate the transition to college. CU's current online and welcome day processes provide only a portion of the support required for student success and do not serve all populations. A comprehensive coordinated approach to orientation that begins before a student arrives, includes mandatory components, and extends through their first year offers the best potential for student success.

## References

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