

Preserving Engagement: Orientation amidst a Global Pandemic

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This article explores the decision-making process, methods, action steps, and considerations for implementing a virtual orientation that embraced student and family engagement despite the global pandemic. We describe communication, staff training and needs, assessment, and enhancements as we move into Year 2 of a virtual orientation experience.

Keywords: engagement, COVID-19, pandemic, orientation, virtual, online, transition, families

When we met in November of 2019 to hold our annual orientation brainstorming session, the New Student & Family Programs (NSFP) staff at Florida State University (FSU) dreamed of additional small groups, affinity group spaces, revamped evening programming, and increased opportunities for student connections. Four short months and many hours of planning and training later, we found ourselves in a similar brainstorming session. Except this time, it was late March, we were facing a global pandemic, and we had just shifted the orientation season completely online in response to COVID-19. Like most orientation, transition, and retention professionals worldwide, we found ourselves devastated and overwhelmed. We had a very short turnaround time (18 days), but one thing was essential for us—we would preserve as much student/family engagement and interaction as possible.

Upon deciding to move the 2020 orientation season to a virtual format, it was clear that some tasks were more urgent than others and that we had to prioritize in order to get as much done as possible. We were also keenly aware that it would take the whole team to pull off such a feat. We increased our traditional bi-monthly staff meetings to once a week, we reevaluated the pre-existing 10-page orientation to-do list to determine what was still relevant and what new tasks needed to be added, and we broke the news to our orientation leaders, campus partners, and incoming students and families. It was essential for us to retain key aspects of orientation that we felt were vital for the successful transition of first-year students and their families. To start, we knew we needed to offer partial refunds, even though we had a no-refund policy in place. We knew we wanted to revisit offers to the orientation leaders, allowing them to decide whether they wanted to join us for a virtual summer. We also knew that we needed to increase communication and transparency regarding the orientation process not only to students and families but also to our academic partners whom we were about to ask to move the entire advising experience into a digital world.

Beyond these initial first steps, we found it difficult to prioritize tasks, getting lost in hypotheticals and

struggling to know what to delegate in order to maximize the little time we had. We ultimately set some guiding questions to ground us and keep us focused on the task at hand.

We asked ourselves,

- How does this impact students, families, or campus partners?
- Is this what is best for our students? Families?
- What do we need to do to provide support long-term?
- Is this accessible? If not, how do we make it accessible?
- Is this inclusive and representative of our personal, professional, and institutional values?
- How are we thinking beyond metrics?

Not only did these guiding questions allow us to stay on track, but they also helped us navigate competing priorities on campus and ask intentional questions. Even though a global pandemic had derailed our orientation plans, we were still receiving the age-old question from campus partners--“how can we be more involved with orientation?”-and this question was only that much more fervent due to COVID-19. Knowing the demand and fatigue associated with being online and stationary for longer periods, we used these questions to explain the balance of content we needed to achieve. The questions allowed us to think creatively and find alternatives beyond orientation to engage campus partners. They empowered us to limit our focus to the essential components of orientation and reminded us to give ourselves and others grace. What was normal before the onset of COVID-19 could not be expected now.

Beyond the guiding questions, we realized some things just make more sense in person. We scheduled socially distant, face-to-face leadership team meetings with masks to better understand each other, avoid the new ever-present notifications from Microsoft Teams, and develop common definitions and terminology for a brand-new process. We also used these opportunities to check in on each other. At these meetings, we decided that our constituents needed check-ins, too. In considering what was most important for incoming students and families during this uncertain time and what truly captured the spirit of FSU orientation, we determined that students and families needed strategic opportunities to engage with the FSU community. The online modules were useful and contained valuable information, but they could not capture the full spirit of the university. To that end, we developed and adapted opportunities for interaction and debrief: Student Small Groups and Ask the Experts panel discussion, Academic Advising, Course Registration Labs, Ignite Your ‘Nole Experience, First Year Fridays, and Family Webinars. Table 1 highlights attendance figures for these events in summer and fall 2020.

Table 1.

Attendance at Virtual Orientation Experiences, Summer 2020 and Academic Year 2020 2021

Program	Intended audience	Summer orientation	Academic year programming
Small Groups and Panel	Students	3,093	N/A
Course Registration Labs	Students	993	222
Ignite Your ‘Nole Experience	Students	216	N/A
First Year Fridays	Both	362	48
Family Webinars	Families	2,559	121

Beyond participation, we also revamped our existing orientation assessment to survey students on their experience in the virtual setting and ascertain essential information to inform long-term programming efforts centered on transition and retention. The assessment was distributed via email once per week to first-time-in-college students who completed orientation the previous week. Surveys were distributed from May 2020 to early August 2020. The survey administration process limited the number of responses and did not account for the later Upper-Division Transfer sessions; however, the data were essential in preparing for future sessions and year-long transition/retention support programming. Altogether 1,371 students took the survey. The responses were cleaned, and surveys with responses to 49% or more of the questions were retained for analysis. After cleaning, 838 surveys were analyzed, with a final survey completion rate of 13.3%.

Orientation Leaders

Preserving as much student and family engagement as possible would be no easy task. It would require buy-in, trust, and preparation from one of the university's most trusted resources—our orientation leaders (OLs). As current undergraduate students, OLs were central to preserving engagement and providing an authentic perspective on how the university was shifting. When evaluating how we wanted to engage incoming students and family members, each avenue included interaction with OLs. With that in mind, the next step was to prepare the OLs to facilitate an unfamiliar experience during an unprecedented time.

An underappreciated benefit of training OLs is that, before COVID-19, they had all participated in a similar orientation experience. Venues or programs may have changed from one entering class to the next. However, the students had a generally common foundation on which to base their expectations for being an orientation leader. Similar to staff having to reimagine orientation planning, our OLs had to readjust their expectations, and we had to readjust how we prepared them.

Building trust and rapport became essential. Before reconfirming students' commitment to the OL role, we provided as much insight as possible. We gave updates and communicated decisions with as much transparency as possible. We shared context and elaborated on what we could. We were honest about what we did not know yet. We held space to process the reality of the situation, and we allowed them to decide whether they wanted to join us for a virtual summer.

The team structure changed as the OLs assumed their new role as key engagement facilitators. The structure and content of training camp transitioned dramatically. We spent time discussing the functionality of Zoom and advocating for access to technology for OLs who needed updated equipment to fulfill their roles. We restructured the role of OLs and established partners to manage on-screen conversations and discussions in the chat. We practiced transitioning in and out of breakout rooms. We required them to participate in the online programming hosted by our campus partners in order for them to be able to accurately discuss online student life. We ensured that access to documents, website links, and contact information for frequently requested departments was easy to locate in one central document.

In order to effectively answer questions and manage the ever-evolving virtual orientation process, we asked the OLs to submit notes after completing their assigned roles for each orientation session—whether they served as a small group facilitator, moderator, panelist, course registration lab assistant, or family webinar assistant. We met as a full staff (all OLs, graduate staff, professional staff, and office staff) each Monday to regroup, refocus, and prepare for the next session. We made adjustments and provided updates based on their session notes.

The intentional training and transparency we provided to OLs early on in the pandemic allowed us to navigate a challenging summer filled with unknowns. We focused on keeping morale up, reframing expectations,

providing support, and remaining nimble in the face of adversity. It gave the OLs the necessary tools and confidence to engage students and families in a digital world, while many were logging in to Zoom for the first time.

Engagement Opportunities

Small Groups and Ask the Experts Panel

Undoubtedly, small student groups and the Ask the Experts panels were two of the most engaging sessions in the virtual orientation setting. Throughout the summer, we saw a total of 3,093 students (48%) participate in these optional programs.

Every small student group and Ask the Experts panel was staffed by one graduate assistant (GA) or NODA intern, one orientation team leader (TL), and 20 OLs. Once the Zoom meeting started, the TL and the GA/intern worked together to welcome students and assign them to breakout rooms for small groups. Each session had 10 small groups with two OLs paired together per group; one OL served as the facilitator, and the other served as moderator. The role of facilitator included leading the small group through introductions and activities, providing information and resources vital to first-year student success, and answering any questions students had. The OLs were encouraged to make their small groups their own and facilitate them in an authentic way. Still, we gave them a script to follow, with facilitator and moderator roles outlined. The OLs received a typed-out introduction in the script that they could say out loud and paste into the chat. We had OLs share their name, pronouns, hometown, major, and involvement as a way to encourage conversation. The script could be read the content verbatim; however, we encouraged facilitators to become familiar with the content to make it more conversational and natural.

The moderator role included setting community guidelines for the space in the Zoom chat. The community guidelines were typed out in their script so that OLs knew when to copy and paste them into the Zoom chat each session. The moderator role also included providing links to any of the resources mentioned by the facilitating OL or adding their insight on those resources. They also answered questions via chat that students might not have been comfortable asking out loud. The script also included backup content in case the OLs finished the session early.

Once small groups ended, all OLs and their student groups returned to the main Zoom room. Before starting the next session, Ask the Experts, the GA/intern facilitating the session would lead students in an activity called Sing Off. The students went back into their small group breakout rooms for 90 seconds and agreed on a song within a given category (some of the most popular categories were Beyonce songs, TV theme songs, and High School Musical songs) to perform in the main Zoom room. The activity served as a fun and engaging break between back-to-back, information-filled sessions for both the students and staff.

Following Sing Off, students were welcomed to the Ask the Experts session, which was their opportunity to ask the OLs questions in a larger setting. Similar to the small group, OLs were either assigned the role of panelist, which involved answering questions verbally, or the role of moderator, which involved providing links in the chat to resources mentioned and fielding questions submitted by students. Students were encouraged to submit any questions they had in the chat, whether about resources on campus such as parking or personal advice for first-year students. To manage the chat most effectively, the settings were adjusted to prevent participants from sending direct messages to anyone other than the session hosts. The GA/intern would then call on the OL panelists to answer questions. An NSFP professional staff member attended the panels to listen to the OL responses and provide feedback at the end.

Toward the end of the small groups and panel discussion, students were encouraged to keep in touch with

their OLs and NSFP via social media and reminded about other engagement opportunities. After all students had left the Zoom, the OLs, TL, GA/intern, and professional staff member stayed in the room for 15 minutes to debrief what went well and what needed to be adjusted or improved for the next session.

According to the orientation assessment data, 86% of respondents indicated that the small group helped them learn about the FSU experience, 88% felt it helped reinforce resources from the online modules, and 70% shared that it helped them create connections with other students.

Academic Advising

Academic advising is an essential component of orientation, and it emerged as the single most crucial aspect of the virtual program. Even though other aspects of virtual orientation could be considered optional in the context of Zoom fatigue and anxiety around the orientation and course registration process, academic advising was deemed to be vital to the success of incoming students, especially given the uncertain nature of classes in the fall semester.

Once this was determined, the challenge then became how to set up the advising process logistically. Based on concerns surrounding Zoom bombing, we decided to create a unique link for each advising unit (academic colleges or departments) for each day of the week. In addition, we also asked advisors to set up their Zoom links to require authentication so that only participants with an FSU login would be able to join. These measures, in addition to providing session rosters to the advisors, allowed us to avoid intrusions into the advising process. One benefit of facilitating advising logistics is that we now have a better handle on the intricacies of FSU's advising units than we ever have before, which has already proven valuable in planning for the 2021 orientation season.

After figuring out the logistics of orientation advising, another challenge was coaching advisors on how best to interact with students in the Zoom environment. Although advisors focused on the end product of advising their students, they paid less attention to the overall student experience with the Zoom appointment. After meeting with the entire advising group (or at least as many as could make the meeting), the advisors indicated the desire to have two advising time blocks rather than individual time slots. Although this was easier logistically than individual time slots, the downside was long wait times in Zoom waiting rooms. As such, we developed icebreakers, discussion questions, and other strategies for engaging students in the waiting room or main Zoom room. In addition, the Division of Undergraduate Studies was able to cross-train some of their advisors and coaching staff to provide day-of support to the advising units with limited staff. Although some units still struggled with long wait times or lack of engagement, we also received reports of positive Zoom engagement among advising units.

In 2019, academic advising satisfaction was at 78%. In 2020, despite COVID-19, we saw academic advising satisfaction increase to 87%. In general, New Student & Family Programs received fewer complaints about academic advising being too rushed or students not understanding the information covered in academic advising. In 2020, we included an open-ended question in the assessment that asked students to share anything else about their advising session. Of the 127 students who answered that question, 41% of the responses highlighted and appreciated their academic advising experience.

Course Registration Labs

Course registration has always been stressful and nerve-wracking for incoming students as they are trying to create their first-semester schedule. In a more traditional year, OLs are present during this time to ease nerves, help with the scheduling platform, and answer questions. Although we moved to a virtual format for orientation, we did not want incoming students to feel unprepared or helpless while navigating their class schedules. In order to continue to provide support for incoming students, we created an online Course

Registration Lab via Zoom to facilitate the one-on-one assistance we had previously offered in person.

We staffed one GA/intern, one TL, two to three Undergraduate Studies professional staff members, one NSFP professional staff member, and eight OLs for every course registration lab.

During the labs, all professional staff members, the GA/Intern, and the TL remained in the main Zoom room. Each of the eight OLs was assigned a breakout room. Student participants were admitted one by one from the waiting room in order to maintain student privacy. The TL served as the facilitator for the lab, welcomed each student as they were admitted, and asked how they could help. If it was a quick “yes or no” question, the TL simply answered the question. If not, A staff member assigned the student to an OL breakout room for more personalized assistance. Each student could share their screen so the OL could see what the student was seeing. Screensharing was especially helpful when students received errors when attempting to register for classes. Once a student received help or joined a breakout room, another student was admitted, and the process repeated until the Zoom waiting room was empty.

NSFP professional staff members were present to assist with orientation holds or answer questions about the Virtual Orientation platform. Undergraduate Studies staff were present to answer questions about classes and degree requirements. The GA/intern served as an administrator and managed the process of assigning students to breakout rooms. In total, we assisted more than 993 students in Course Registration Labs throughout the summer.

Virtual Course Registration Labs proved to be an invaluable part of the orientation experience, allowing us to engage students and help them through the most stressful part of the orientation process. Most respondents (86%) shared that they felt better about course registration after attending a Course Registration Lab.

Ignite Your ‘Nole Experience and First Year Fridays

Historically, orientation programming has included opportunities for students to network with campus partners, learn about opportunities and resources, and get to know other students. Whether through a campus resource fair, breakout sessions, or evening programming—the opportunities to engage with campus partners, academic areas, and student organizations were plentiful. We wanted to provide similar opportunities despite the different modality of orientation in 2020, so we implemented two new programs: Ignite Your ‘Nole Experience and First Year Fridays.

Ignite Your ‘Nole Experience allowed students to connect with key student groups and visualize what their FSU experience could look like. Inspired by the three torches that make up the Florida State University seal, we invited 12 organizations to participate in Ignite Your ‘Nole Experience. These groups included the Black Student Union, Asian American Student Union, Hispanic/Latinx Student Union, Pride Student Union, Women Student Union, Fraternity and Sorority Life, Student Engagement, Interfaith Ministries, Out-of-State Students, Transfer Student Success, International Programs, and Marching Chiefs (marching band). These areas allowed students to meaningfully engage with current FSU students who shared their identity and build connections—an opportunity that was previously difficult to provide during orientation due to the limited diversity within each session.

Each Ignite session was co-facilitated by at least two OLs and members of the organization. This opportunity allowed incoming students to connect more with the OLs and other students and staff. Incoming students could attend any Ignite session they desired, regardless of their scheduled orientation session.

In addition to Ignite Your ‘Nole Experience, we also launched First Year Fridays, which provided incoming students and their families an opportunity to learn more about resources and services introduced through the virtual orientation modules. These sessions helped students and families learn more about the Career Center, the Office of Accessibility Services, preparations for law or medical school, and more. This format allowed us to share

timely information with the specific populations interested in the content without adding to the overall length of orientation.

Through these program offerings, we engaged 578 students and helped connect them to communities and resources on campus. Of those, almost all (99%) rated their Ignite session positively, and 94% indicated they better understood how to get connected due to the session. A similar percentage (92%) indicated they felt connected due to their participation in an Ignite Session.

Family Webinars

With the underlying theme of engagement, we knew families would also benefit from enhanced content, debriefing opportunities, and the ability to hear directly about the student experience. So much of the traditional in-person orientation centered around helping families feel at ease and excited about their student's decision to attend FSU—that was not going to happen with modules alone, especially not during a global pandemic. To meet this need, we created a 10-week webinar series focused on various aspects of student life. We opened up a survey for families to share what sessions they wanted and used their feedback to build the schedule. From diversity programs and resources to health and safety, involvement to academic success, we facilitated weekly hour-long sessions throughout the summer with various campus partners.

Presenters gave a brief overview of their area, programs, and resources, and the remaining time was devoted to Q&A. The program design allowed for customized content and relevant and timely information sharing. With the ever-evolving nature of COVID-19 in the summer of 2020, this was essential. The NODA interns helped brainstorm, structure, and deliver the series each week, and the OLs assisted campus partners with answering on-screen and chat-based questions. The OLs shared an etiquette statement at the beginning of each session, reminding families that the session was being recorded and that we were committing to upholding the values of Florida State University in the session.

One of our favorite aspects of the Family Webinar Series was the final session, which featured an Ask the Experts panel for families to ask any remaining questions. The panel was especially helpful in meeting the needs of families and further customizing content. We were able to offer two versions of this session simultaneously—one in English and one in Spanish—by using the talents of the OLs.

In total, we had 2,559 family members engage with the Family Webinar series throughout the summer.

Transitioning to Fall

After the rush of summer orientation was over, we felt the need to transition some of the successes to the fall semester and continue providing engagement opportunities to students and family members.

The success of the Family Webinar Series led us to reformat the existing FSU Chats to Zoom sessions. Just like the Family Webinar Series, these were designed to address the needs of families, provide insight into student experiences in the virtual environment, and build a sense of community among FSU families in the state of Florida and beyond. We knew families were feeling a sense of uncertainty and wanted to ensure that they knew the university was taking the appropriate precautions and that their students were well cared for. FSU Chats were formatted around topics such as accessing FSU resources (in-person and online), educating families of first-generation college students on the virtual environment, and connecting FSU families living in the same region. At the end of each session, we assessed the questions and concerns expressed by participants and used that information to adjust the following sessions to fit their needs as the semester progressed. Families reached out and expressed how beneficial the sessions were and how much they appreciated us keeping them informed during the pandemic. In total, we saw 121 family members in the fall semester.

We also transitioned the First Year Friday series into something new—an opportunity for community

building between first-year students and their OLs. Once a month, NSFP hosted a Zoom session on Friday mornings during which OLs were available to reconnect with students, answer questions, and simply provide a space to check in as they navigated college during the pandemic. We also structured the meetings with a themed activity, often based on the semester or upcoming holidays. In October, the OLs told spooky FSU stories, guided attendees through a reflection focused on gratitude in November, and focused on finals towards the end of the fall semester.

It is worth noting that attendance at these events was relatively low. We had, on average, two to five first-year students at each event, and sometimes none at all. As has been the case with much of the virtual programming this year, engaging the same volume of students as in years past continues to be tough. That said, there were moments when these programs seemed to be just what the participants needed. At one particular session, two of the OLs welcomed one anxious, overwhelmed student who said she was “stressed and just needed to talk it out.” She was able to do just that and left knowing she could count on support from NSFP as she continued her college experience. We have continued to operate based on the philosophy that impacting one student is an impact worth making.

NSFP also continued engaging students in partnership with Undergraduate Studies through Course Registration Labs. With the ever-changing landscape of COVID-19, we found that new and current students were not retaining the processes and procedures they learned as well as they once had. Many felt anxiety leading up to their scheduled course registration times, and we decided to host Course Registration Labs to refresh students on the process and provide needed support. We hosted six sessions in fall and early spring and engaged 222 students.

Communication Management

As we began the Virtual Orientation process, an area that quickly emerged as a critical concern was orientation-related communication. We had a full orientation schedule filled with wonderful, engaging programming opportunities for students and families. Now we faced the daunting task of communicating these opportunities to the masses. Although we did our best to update the website, registration portal, and email messages, we received a high volume of emails and other messages with questions regarding the virtual orientation process.

In order to deal with this massive influx of messages, we used an all-hands-on-deck approach and had every NSFP staff member assist with answering emails. We increased the hours of the student office staff and gained a renewed sense of appreciation for their contributions. We had on-call hours for staff during peak evening and weekend hours to promptly address student concerns and confusion, hopefully preventing them from missing required/essential content.

We leveraged an email marketing platform to create more engaging emails with merge fields, videos, and social media integration. It helped us track opens, clicks, and overall performance and allowed us to use tags to gauge where a student was in the orientation process. We increased our social media presence as a way to offer the continued opportunity for connections. We created stories for OLs and incoming students to share, showcasing their FSU experiences and promoting the different programs during virtual orientation. We also implemented Microsoft Teams to enhance day-to-day communication between the staff and campus partners assisting with orientation programs.

While relying on students (and families) to regularly check their email was a challenge, we used all of the tools available to provide the best experience possible. We realized early on that some people would inevitably miss a step—just as they did during in-person orientation sessions—regardless of how much information and instruction is provided. In these cases, we worked with students individually to catch them up or get them

switched into another session.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Summer 2020 was easily one of the most challenging experiences of our combined student affairs careers, but it was also rewarding. We learned the power of human connection, even if it could only be felt via Zoom. We invested in campus partnerships to make our small staff seem big. We reminded ourselves (and the university community) that orientation is not one event but a process—a series of ongoing onboarding experiences that help students acclimate to their new homes and thrive.

After the summer, we continued the Family Webinar Series, First Year Fridays, and Course Registration Labs. We knew that just because orientation was over that students and families had everything they needed. Numbers were lower than we had hoped and were a far cry from what we experienced throughout the summer. However, we offered multiple options for engagement, and we were there for students and families when they needed us.

As for summer 2021, we all hoped that we would be back to normal, facilitating in-person orientation with the usual breakout sessions, hallway chants, early morning wake-up calls, and small face-to-face groups. But we have found ourselves preparing for another year of virtual orientation due to the uncertainty of COVID-19 and the vaccine rollout. While it was not what we initially wanted, the silver lining is that it allows us to refine the process and build upon what we did last summer. In traditional OTR fashion, we wanted the opportunity to assess and make it better, and we now get that opportunity.

We are currently planning for the 2021 orientation season and are excited about what lies ahead. One of the biggest changes we anticipate is a synchronous welcome experience. Here we hope to provide the traditional excitement and energy of a face-to-face orientation while also leveraging the digital space to provide a walkthrough of university systems and an opportunity to troubleshoot technology. We plan to provide additional small-group sessions this summer, hoping that it will enhance a sense of belonging and further connections with current and incoming students. With updates to the orientation content, we look forward to splitting up the orientation modules over two days, allowing for more digestible and timely information sharing, paired with Q&A time. We also plan to reincorporate a dedicated session and discussion about diversity, equity, and inclusion and the expectations of the FSU community, using the Seminole Creed. Because of what we learned about the virtual orientation advising process, we plan to provide an orientation advising training focused on Zoom room management and student engagement in the Zoom space to further engage students with academic support. We plan to preserve the First Year Friday and Ignite Your 'Nole Experience sessions, with minor adjustments to reach more students and better address their needs. We will merge the Family Webinar Series with family orientation to provide a more synchronous and engaging experience, which we hope will increase family participation.

As for the OLs, they will remain the central focus of orientation programming, and we have already made some significant adjustments. We reduced the number of OLs and increased the number of Team Leader positions. We recognized that within a virtual setting, having a larger team meant difficulty in ensuring an equitable experience for every OL. Additionally, it was much more difficult to provide a space that fully allowed the team to bond with such large numbers. We hired a Team Captain position, which will help with accountability and provide additional support for team leaders. With the addition of a new role, more team leaders, and a smaller number of OLs, we can create intentional space for building relationships, allowing every OL to grow and succeed.

Although we do not know what 2021 will bring or if we will be able to successfully implement our ideas,

we know without a doubt that much of the success this summer was about engaging students and families as much as possible. As long as that remains a primary focus of orientation this year, we will continue to endure COVID-19.