

# Reimagining OTR During COVID-19 through Transformative Practices

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*COVID-19 was a catalyst that provided orientation professionals the opportunity to reimagine their programs and challenge the status quo. The University of Houston used Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning framework and concepts from Davies's (2017) work on transitional justice in education to make significant programmatic changes. Through the process of truth telling, critical reflection, and addressing failures, this article provides an example of applying scholarly frameworks to in-person and virtual orientation programs over the course of three orientation cycles to ensure each program is more equitable and student-centered than in the past.*

*Keywords: transitional justice, transformative practice, reflection*

A little over a year ago, student affairs and enrollment management professionals were forced into unprecedented situations that normally take multiple decades and career moves to experience. In-person classes and programs were immediately stopped, campus events canceled, and the country went on lockdown. Orientation professionals, cast into an unknown void about the future of their programs, had only three months and dissipating resources to re-envision transition programs for new students. COVID-19 created massive uncertainty and challenges for higher education, but it also highlighted existing concerns.

At the University of Houston, we met this uncertainty with fear, hope, guilt, and motivation to succeed. We feared for loved ones, students, staff, and institution, and still do. We hoped things would not be as bad as they ultimately turned out to be and still are. We felt guilty for not being better prepared for such an event, even though it was impossible to prepare for a global pandemic. Yet, through all of those uncomfortable feelings, we were still motivated to succeed and provide a great experience for new students and staff. In order to meet the new demands of delivering an orientation program during a pandemic, we orchestrated and executed an enhancement plan based on transformative practices. This article provides an overview of the transformative practices the University of Houston embraced to tackle the implications of COVID-19 and reimagine orientation, transition, and retention programs. We share this story from a position of vulnerability rather than authority or expertise.

## Transformative Practices

Transformation takes time in higher education, something we did not have amid a global pandemic in spring 2020. However, this environment allowed us to challenge ourselves and move outside our comfort zone to implement transformative practices in our work. In order to do this, we first had to engage in transformative learning. Generally, transformative learning is defined as:

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (Davies et al., 2020, p. 219)

Jack Mezirow (1991) coined the term transformative learning and identified 10 phases in which it is accomplished are. Briefly, these include

- a disorienting dilemma
- self-examination
- critical assessment of assumptions
- recognition of one's discontent and the process of transformation
- exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
- planning a course of action
- acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
- provisional trial of new roles
- building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- a reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's new perspective

Additionally, Davies et al. (2020) stated, "the learner can choose to either ignore this new perspective or reflect on this new perspective and their own values and beliefs and act upon them, leading to full TL (transformative learning)" (p. 219).

We also focused on frameworks of transitional justice, or "the process by which regimes attempt to move – or transition – from conflict, authoritarianism or oppression characterized by systematic violations of norms to more well-established democratic legal regimes, which can protect against such occurrences in the future" (Davies, 2017, p. 2). Coined in the 1980s, the term has been applied to international and domestic law, criminal justice reform, and many other sectors where there has been harm to individuals. Education is one of those sectors, and Davies (2017) argued education "can play an important role in fueling conflict and injustice" (p. 5). From school segregation tactics to white-washing history textbooks, manipulating the education system is a common tool of the oppressor (Loewen, 2018; Rothstein, 2017).

In our approach to orientation programs, we do not assume a parallel or intend to minimize other sectors in which transitional justice and transformative practices are used. Instead, we hope to offer a micro-level look at how one institution transformed its orientation program using these frameworks as a guide to better serve students and staff. Additionally, we hope other practitioners can use these frameworks as critical lenses for implementing transformative practices on their own campuses.

## **The Reimagination Process**

Without a doubt, COVID-19 was a disorienting dilemma and challenged us on long-held beliefs and tactics we employed to execute orientation programs. The pandemic created barriers for incoming students and staff but also highlighted existing ones. With Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning framework and concepts from Davies's (2017) work on transitional justice in education, the University of Houston embarked on a journey of truth telling, reflecting critically, and addressing our failures. This journey allowed us to reimagine orientation and transition programs amid adversity while grappling with the fact that we were also producers of it.

### *Truth Telling*

The concept of telling the truth or acknowledgment is simple, but executing it is much more difficult. In

terms of transitional justice, “truth seeking includes the necessary identification of real people in the conflict” (Davies, 2017, p. 2). During the pandemic, naming the “real people” was easy. We wanted resolution for new students, family members, student staff, and admittedly, ourselves as professional staff members. The entire program needed to be reimagined, and we wanted to acknowledge each actor’s obstacles moving forward. To do that, we had to tell the truth about our challenges as professionals and those we had established for our constituents. Truth telling involved confronting the past, attempting to rid ourselves of bias, and stepping outside our comfort zone while trying to maintain personal and institutional harmony during a global pandemic.

Orientation is a mandatory experience for incoming first-year and transfer students on our campus. Two-day sessions for first-year students and one-day sessions for transfer students occurred throughout the summer with concurrent family programming during each session. Students could opt for online orientation if they met exemptions related to medical needs, travel, or military service. Less than 2% of the incoming class requested an exemption, yet this pre-pandemic program structure provided multiple barriers to the incoming population and staff members.

**Accessibility.** Emphasizing in-person orientation created accessibility barriers to members of the student population. Orientation sessions occurred only during weekdays, which may have interfered with a student’s or their family/supporter’s work schedule. Additionally, students who lived at a distance had to incur travel costs. Travel time may also have required additional time away from work, resulting in a loss of income in addition to the orientation fee.

**Consistency.** For a student who was exempt from an in-person orientation, their transition experience was drastically reduced to an online orientation, which was not memorable. The previous online orientation was run through Blackboard and met the minimum requirements of ensuring students saw state-mandated sessions and connected to their academic advisors.

**Overwhelming amounts of information.** Orientation was designed to be a one-stop shop for incoming students. This model allowed students to maximize their time on campus and focused on providing as much information as possible through meetings, presentations, resource fairs, and academic advising sessions. Communication sent before and after focused primarily on orientation logistics and barriers to enrollment, including changing a major, immunization holds, and preparation exam holds. Students learned about other campus partners and resources during lecture-style presentations that were not available or accessible in one location after orientation was over.

**Increased anxiety.** Incoming students arrived at orientation with increasing amounts of anxiety. For some students, orientation was the first experience with the institution outside of the application process. Leading up to the in-person orientation sessions, we did not have any pre-orientation content to introduce a student to resources the campus offers. Additionally, as previously stated, the communications were primarily focused on logistics and enrollment holds. Each college hosts its own advising process and sends information about academic advising separately. Even if students consistently checked their email messages, they did not receive specific information until they attended their in-person orientation.

**Possible staff harm.** Orientation programming expectations potentially harmed professional staff and student staff. Events could easily last beyond an eight-hour workday and included overnight on-call shift rotations. Material preparation for orientation sessions held at the beginning of the week required staff members to work over the weekend. In addition, student staff members played many roles for incoming students, including mentor, counselor, academic advisor, and campus resource expert.

## *Critical Reflection*

Merriam (2004) stated, “Critical reflection on experience is key to transformational learning” (p. 62). Critical reflection is “essential for reaching decisions on complex issues affecting individuals and society and, therefore, is widely espoused as a principal goal of adult and higher education” (Kreber, 2012, p. 323). After a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991) or “concrete experience” (Kolb, 1984), scholars promote the importance of self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, and reflective observations to facilitate cognitive development and improve experiences. Transformative practices do not occur without critical reflection.

Kreber (2012) argued, “there are numerous psychological and sociocultural factors that can make engagement in critical reflection difficult,” but participants are “encouraged to identify the assumptions underlying their meaning perspectives or habits of minds that give rise to how they interpret particular situations, subject these to critical scrutiny, and explore alternatives” (pp. 329-330). Of course, practicing critical reflection is easier said than done. After truth telling and acknowledging deficiencies in the program, we engaged in personal and institutional introspection, collecting differing perspectives on ways to improve from stakeholders and benchmarking similar orientation programs to meet the needs of students during COVID-19.

***Personal and institutional introspection.*** We first analyzed our thoughts and feelings around our work. In practicing truth telling, we were able to identify personal values conflicts as starting points for transformation. Additionally, we also considered institutional values in our reflection. We intended to align the orientation program with institutional directives while challenging archaic practices that no longer served the students and staff. Once our personal and institutional values were on the table, we could move forward with addressing our shortcomings and failures.

***Collecting differing perspectives.*** To achieve balance during the reflective period, we also sought input from external and internal stakeholders. We intended to gather information from campus partners, advisors, and external partners to help us critique the program and their involvement. The feedback we received was impactful because it exposed us to critical concerns about the programs we would not have identified otherwise.

Benchmarking orientation programs. As part of critical reflection, we wanted to draw inspiration from other phenomenal orientation programs to reimagine our own. A critical question we asked ourselves was, “How are orientation programs across the country holistically serving students in ways we are not?” This question is helpful even when we are not experiencing a global pandemic, but the practice was especially insightful and rewarding as we moved toward a more accessible and transformative program.

## *Addressing Failures*

For us, addressing failures meant doing what needed to be done to transform the practices to serve students holistically. Watkins and colleagues (2012) stated, “This kind of transformative learning demands collective, critical reflection in, on, or through action to build new opportunities or to address troubling challenges” (p. 374). COVID-19 allowed us to reimagine orientation programs and identify our failures through truth telling and critical reflection, and thus we sought to address the failures in future programming. The following section provides an overview of the transformative process and practices beginning March 2020, three months before the summer/fall 2020 orientation season. From there, the section outlines the continuation of these transformative practices with each subsequent orientation season.

***Summer/fall 2020 plan.*** In March 2020, the institution provided a directive that all orientation programs would be virtual for summer/fall 2020. With this mandate in mind, we created a plan that addressed issues we identified through truth telling and critical reflection of in-person programs. First, we worked with an online orientation vendor to build a virtual orientation infrastructure that could more easily accommodate the traffic of

the entire incoming population than was possible on Blackboard. Next, orientation staff worked with the campus community to create text and video-based content for the virtual orientation modules that served as the basis for a fully asynchronous orientation.

Orientation registration had already opened to new students before we began converting to a virtual operation. We adapted previously set in-person dates to fit into a new virtual orientation schedule that would not overwhelm the orientation and advising staffs or confuse incoming students, opening virtual orientation to a new group of students every Monday of summer/fall 2020. Outside the asynchronous orientation modules, we offered supplemental virtual programming designed to build connections among incoming students and showcase campus partners. Family and supporter programming occurred throughout the summer on its own schedule and included academic, student, and campus partner components. The summer/fall 2020 program addressed the following failures when compared to the execution of the previous in-person program:

- **Increasing fee deferment access.** In order to complete registration for a selected date, students must first make an orientation fee payment. While the institution does not offer a fee waiver, we do offer fee deferment, which moves the payment due date for orientation to the tuition and fees payment deadline (mid-August) for the upcoming semester. Fee deferments allow students to use financial aid or loans to cover their orientation fee. In the past, students had to receive a certain amount of financial aid to be eligible for a deferment. We decided to grant a deferment to all students who requested one.
- **Creating schedule flexibility.** Students were encouraged to complete their orientation modules, meet with their advisors, and register for classes within two weeks of gaining access to their virtual orientation modules. The orientation modules could be completed within two to three hours, either all at once or broken up into smaller segments to best accommodate a student's preference. This new model gave students the flexibility to fit orientation and advising into their existing work, family, school, and social calendars.
- **Resetting staff expectations.** The supplemental virtual programming from campus partners allowed us to reset expectations with student staff. Instead of being experts about all areas of campus, the student staff focused on the most important roles of an orientation team leader—welcoming and assisting incoming students with their transition to campus through sharing their authentic stories. Maintenance for opening orientation modules to new students each week was significantly less than preparing for an in-person orientation, and the professional staff were able to better manage the workload during typical work hours.
- **Establishing ongoing access to resources.** Once the orientation modules were available to a student, they could be accessed at any point leading up to the first two weeks of class to be used as an additional resource. As academic and campus partners held supplemental sessions, captioned video recordings were uploaded to their respective websites for both student and guest sessions. This action provided an opportunity for those unable to attend the live session to receive the desired information.

### *Lessons Learned From Summer/Fall 2020 Plan*

Just as we used truth telling and critical reflection to reimagine orientation programming for summer/fall 2020, we completed the process again in preparation for spring 2021 orientation. We analyzed assessment data, talked to student and professional staff members, and held campus partner debriefs. Through these efforts, we identified failures to address for the next orientation program season.

**Limited engagement with supplemental programming.** Although the supplemental programming offered throughout the summer provided students with the opportunity for live connections, less than 2% of incoming students took advantage of a live session. However, many students reported that they did not feel a connection to

campus. This data discrepancy forced us to reevaluate the minimum orientation requirements to better manage the expectations of incoming students.

***Need to balance student autonomy with orientation structure.*** Based on email inbox inquiries and campus partner feedback, students struggled to take care of next steps directly related to their ability to enroll. Although the information was provided in the orientation modules, students wanted answers to the information immediately. Specifically, we received many questions regarding academic advising. Each college handled the virtual advising process a little differently, and orientation staff felt that we were passing students along instead of helping them resolve their issues.

## Spring 2021 Plan

Once again, we received the directive from our institution that orientation programming would be conducted virtually. We added a synchronous virtual orientation component to the existing orientation modules to address the failures we identified from summer/fall 2020 programming. First, we created the new orientation structure in the registration system, and five dates were opened for which a synchronous session would be held. To make the most of valuable virtual time, we determined which information should be shared with students in a synchronous session based on email inbox data and campus partner feedback. Lastly, we updated the orientation modules to remove or adjust information that would be shared during the synchronous session. These adjustments moved the programming into a more traditional format of pre-orientation modules coupled with a live orientation session.

The synchronous session lasted three hours and provided students with an opportunity to gain information customized to their needs. The schedule included a welcome session from the executive director of admissions and assistant vice provost, a financial aid and payment overview from the Integrated Enrollment Services team, small student groups led by the orientation team leaders, a campus resource fair, and an introductory meeting hosted by academic colleges. Family and supporter orientation occurred concurrently with the live student session and followed a similar schedule. Instead of a small-group session, family and supporters attended an adjacent welcome session to meet the Dean of Students staff and supplemental sessions specific to their needs. In addition to the live session and pre-orientation modules, we offered supplemental virtual programming to connect students to campus and showcase campus partners. Revisions we included for spring 2021 addressed previous failures in the following ways:

- **Adding pre-orientation modules.** The asynchronous modules went from being the entire orientation process to simply being a part of a larger transition process. The pre-orientation modules opened two weeks before the first synchronous session. Once the modules were opened, students who registered for orientation gained immediate access and could complete them at their own pace. The modules introduced students to university COVID-19 protocols and encompassed enrollment-focused tasks such as changing their major, immunization holds, and preparation exams before their synchronous session. During the live session, students came better prepared for their academic college meetings and advising.
- **Connecting incoming students to current students.** With the addition of student small groups during the live orientation component, participation in student-led sessions increased from 2% to 100%. Although there is a defined structure for small groups, the student staff were trained to listen to the common themes emerging from their incoming students to guide the conversation. This addition to the synchronous events resulted in more awareness of and greater participation in the supplemental sessions.

- **Creating live connection opportunities for campus partners.** At each in-person orientation, we held a resource fair. To showcase campus partners to incoming students during summer/fall 2020, we created a virtual campus resource guide, a website featuring campus partners with links to their specific websites and offerings. Additionally, we allowed campus partners to host supplemental sessions for both students and parents. For spring 2021, we updated the campus resource guide and built in a 45-minute virtual resource fair that overlapped with the lunch hour in the live orientation schedule. Orientation participants could move between campus partner breakout rooms to obtain information relevant to their student experience. Since we offered specific orientation dates, the time commitment for campus partners was equivalent to in-person programming.
- **Easing concerns about academic advising.** Student inquiries about advising-related issues were a large portion of the orientation correspondence over the summer. Adding the academic college meeting to the live session allowed students to learn about the academic advising process and address follow-up questions directly with the college representatives. This reduced advising-related inquiries directed to orientation staff and ensured students felt they had been assisted adequately.

### *Lessons Learned from Spring 2021 Plan*

As we prepare for summer/fall 2021 orientation programs, it was important for us to once again complete the truth telling and critical reflection process. We used the same methods as with previous semesters to identify failures. While we were happy with our progress, we could still identify failures from the spring 2021 orientation that we wish to address with future programs.

**Teaching students virtual expectations.** We included relevant information related to the transition of incoming students in the orientation. However, assessment data indicated students wanted more information on being academically successful in a virtual capacity. Specifically, students wanted more information about learning software processes such as logging in to Blackboard, navigating Microsoft Teams, and engaging during synchronous and asynchronous course modalities.

**Adding a pre-orientation module hold.** Two orientation holds appeared on a new student's account—one to complete orientation and another for academic advising. These holds prevented course enrollment until students completed the desired actions. Because of the success of pre-orientation modules, we will be adding a hold specific to those modules. While that may seem like an additional barrier to enrollment, we found students pay very close attention to their enrollment holds. We hope these three holds will help students progress through the orientation process and encourage them to complete the modules before their live session.

## **Moving Forward**

As vaccinations become available and further research verifies virus protection protocols, our institution has directed us to conduct both in-person and virtual programs for summer/fall 2021. We will be planning multiple online synchronous sessions and in-person events. Before attending an orientation session, completion of the pre-orientation modules will be required, which includes university COVID-19 protocols. Regardless of whether a student chooses to attend virtually or in person, they will receive a similar programmatic experience to ensure consistency across the cohort. If in-person programs cannot occur, we will be able to conduct virtual programming on the originally scheduled date. Students will also have a variety of supplemental programming, allowing them to engage with campus resources and current and incoming students. Family and supporter programs will be held concurrent to virtual and in-person sessions, and supplemental programming will also be offered throughout the summer. Compared to the summer/fall 2020 plan, the summer/fall 2021 plan showcases significant growth in accessibility, consistency, information sharing, and staff expectations.

## **Conclusion**

Reimagining orientation programs due to COVID-19 was the catalyst for transformative practices at the University of Houston. Conducting the process of truth telling, critical reflection, and addressing failures of the original in-person program and two virtual orientation cycles allowed us to develop plans that are continuously more sustainable each cycle. These frameworks can be used across many orientation, transition, and retention programs at various higher education institutions. The most beneficial transformative practice is the infusion of transformative learning and a transitional justice-centered approach into the orientation program planning process, ensuring that each orientation cycle will be more equitable and student-centered than past programs.

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