Online New Student Orientation
Best Practices Guide
Introduction

The New Student Orientation (NSO) for a university or college is a vital way for students to become acculturated to the institution’s environment. It is a point of introduction to academic, other support services, and key policies for the institution. Importantly, it is often the first opportunity to welcome students and introduce them to the institution’s culture and history, which helps them feel more connected to its mission and the wider community.

Student orientations are essential to retention efforts: A 2009 study confirms correlations between lower retention rates and lower participation in orientation programs (Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009). To this end, orientations need to be considered an important and mandatory part of any institution’s retention and support strategy.

In this document, we will provide an overview of orientation strategies and provide recommendations for creating an orientation strategy for your institution.
New Student Orientation Delivery

A new student orientation should not be thought of as a one-time event or an online course with limited access. Instead, the orientation process should be an on-going effort that encompasses a variety of programs and experiences during the student’s first year. For traditional students, orientations typically take place after acceptance and prior to enrollment. However, in designing your institution’s orientation strategy, it is important to keep in mind that many students these days are not traditional students entering in the fall, so you will want to offer some orientation activities for students who are starting classes at any point in the year. In addition, an online orientation framework can provide supplemental resources for those who attend an in-person orientation event.

There are many ways to offer a face-to-face set of orientation events. Some may occur in cohorts during the late summer or prior to the first week of classes for fall starts. They may be informative, activity-based, or culture building. Some institutions hold an initial week of informational sessions and activities facilitated by staff, students, and faculty, while others promote off-campus team-building activities. Resources for helping you develop face-to-face programs will be listed at the end of this document. While there are a variety of legitimate approaches to developing an orientation, remember that your programming must be informational and genuinely welcome the student into this new environment. Whether the student is leaving home for the first time, traveling from another country to earn a degree, or completing a degree at mid-life, the student should exit the orientation feeling excited about their new adventure and confident about effectively navigating your institution’s systems. What’s more, the student should feel like a valuable and welcome part of your community.
New Student Orientation Delivery (continued)

It is important to note that orientation activities are most often structured only for the student, but some also may be inclusive of family and/or partners in order to build the student’s support network and encourage wider community involvement. Some institutions offer “pre-orientation” activities and programs that are based around areas of particular academic interest, such as nursing or performance arts. Others offer special educational support to at-risk students with programming in areas such as math, which traditionally can be stumbling blocks for many students. In some instances, pre-term service learning programs, such as working on a community-based project, can provide excellent pre-orientation activities for more traditional students.

Orientation activities ideally involve coordination between the Division of Student Affairs, Enrollment and Advising, administration, and faculty. Including current students in orientation activities for all modalities (online, in-person, etc.) is an excellent strategy. This allows new students to be introduced to the community by their peers rather than strictly by administration. This often results in a more welcoming voice for the orientation.

Having students facilitate orientation programs or activities is also an excellent way to provide leadership opportunities to current students and to allow them to help shape the culture of the institution. Current students can also play an important role in setting the tone and voice of the online orientation experience in particular. Find ways to use student narrators for online videos wherever possible, and be sure to provide online spaces where current students can answer questions for new students—and be sure they identify themselves as students so your new students understand that they are talking to their new peers. Having current students facilitate online activities, discussions, and experience-sharing will help online students build important connections. Include faculty whenever possible to help build the important relationship between faculty and student as well.
Recommended Topics

A student orientation should do three things: provide an introduction to the academic experience of the institution, provide an outline of the services and support that your institution offers, and welcome the student to the culture and community of your institution. In order to help you provide a comprehensive orientation for your institution, especially for online students, we have prepared the Helix New Student Orientation Framework for you. It provides guidance on the kinds of topic areas you will want to include in your orientation.

Not all modules or sections of an orientation are required if they are not relevant to your institution, and they do not all need to be delivered to every student. For instance, you can make the graduate student module only available to graduate students or the online student module only available to online-only students. Additional specific sections or modules are easy to add, and sections are also easy to delete. Of course, the content you create for each page of the module is up to you, but the framework offers a comprehensive outline to get you started.

The Helix framework recommends a quiz at the end of each module, designed to gently assess student progress and understanding. We recommend that quizzes be set so that students can take them as many times as required to earn a “grade” of 75% or higher. These low stakes activities are designed to reduce anxiety for students, and they can potentially help advising staff target areas where content in the orientation may be confusing or lacking. We also recommend designing the quizzes and orientation so that students will have access to the final survey, which serves as the completion of the orientation program, when all quizzes have been completed. The content for this survey can be delivered on a survey feature that is either external or internal to the learning management system.
Recommended Topics (continued)

A student who feels well prepared before beginning classes is more likely to be successful so you will want to make your orientation as robust as possible. Despite the numerous topics in the Helix framework, this is not a comprehensive list and you may find that your institution wishes to increase focus on a particular topic, such as your mission and values. In addition, some areas of the framework may not be relevant to your student population, or you may wish to further customize the orientation for various student populations.

It’s important to note that while it may be tempting to build out pages that simply contain links to the relevant resource pages at your institution, remember that an orientation is an educational experience in itself. Students will greatly benefit if you frame the material in a way that helps them understand the context and need for the content you have included in the orientation. This is especially important for first generation students who may lack a reference point about the expectations and process associated with attending college.

While you should provide solid framing and context for students in your orientation, your informational pages must also be accessible and easy to read. Avoid being too wordy, and use bullet points when possible to convey key points. Draw on a variety of media to help convey information. Short videos (under 3 minutes) are always a good idea. Use images wherever possible to reinforce your messages, and always provide a list of resource citations to model your institution’s high academic standards and expectations.
Online Orientation Best Practices

Even if your institution provides a full, in-person set of orientation activities, we strongly recommend that you also provide an online orientation to reinforce what students need to know. It should also serve as a single portal and resource for students to access on an as-needed basis. Ideally, the content in the orientation is provided in such a way students can have continued access throughout their time on campus.

It is crucial that fully online students are provided with a distinctive orientation experience that addresses their specific circumstances and that also provides them with an opportunity to connect with other students and with the community, history, and values of your institution. A single online introduction can be used to provide information and direction to both online and face-to-face students, but it is essential that online students be provided with information and opportunities that reflect their unique educational profile. In particular, the orientation should address the specific concerns that frequently impact online students such as time management.

You may also consider which face-to-face orientation activities can be usefully modified for an online setting. For instance, you could have new students complete a task together (such as reading a book or viewing a film), and then have faculty facilitate student conversations. Synchronous technologies, social media, and collaborative opportunities can also be used to create connections and a sense of community while exposing students to technologies they may be asked to use in their classes. Social media and the institutional online portal can be leveraged to support and sustain peer-to-peer interactions and orientation follow-up. An online course shell with interaction and chat capabilities can enhance orientation activities, and social media pages aimed specifically at incoming students can also be created.

Generally, offer a flexible path through the orientation activities, and offer them multiple times and in multiple formats. The more opportunities your institution provides for students to receive the necessary information, the better.
New Student Orientation Follow-Up

Your institution should plan for outreach to students at regular points throughout their time as a student. Success and support strategies might include proactive communications or outreach from a coach to ensure students are engaging with the resources provided by the institution; providing guidance if a student experiences an academic, financial, or personal obstacle; and assisting with program planning to help them successfully complete their program. Some ideas for follow up activities could include a speaker’s program for new students that is focused on specific topics such as study tips, time management, and self-care; these can be delivered to both on campus and remote students. Other opportunities could include professional development and networking with current students and alumni. There is no end to the ways the institution can provide additional support and value to the learning experience.

Continuing orientation activities are an excellent way to focus the efforts of the enrollment and advising team and to help pinpoint areas where support or troubleshooting may be required. Advising teams should identify the following student populations prior to orientation; these populations should be monitored for their participation in orientation activities:

- First generation students
- Transfer students
- Veterans
- Adult and returning students
- Students with disabilities

We recommend that advising teams track participation in the online orientation through the learning management system and provide outreach to students who experience problems or who stall out at various points in the process. Retention teams should be aware of, and be represented in, all follow-up orientation activities; they must also be prepared to connect with students on a regular basis.
Conclusion

Developing a New Student Orientation is key to helping your students feel competent and prepared for the often daunting journey on which they’re about to embark. Helix Education has the expertise and the experience to provide your institution with guidance and support for creating a meaningful and content-rich orientation for your new students; our team works directly with your subject matter experts to gently guide them in the development of the course that starts your students on the path to graduation.

References

Resources

The following website contains publications and membership information for support of student orientations:


The following low-cost manual suggests a variety of approaches to, and benefits of, student orientations:


The following link provides research, resources, and high-impact practices for all post-secondary students at different stages of institutional transition:

- University of South Carolina. (n.d.). National resource center for the first-year experience and students in transition. [http://sc.edu/fye/index.html](http://sc.edu/fye/index.html)

Questions?

If you want additional insights on this or any other topic related to your online transition, reach out and let us know!

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