Tips to develop and implement online new student orientation experience

By Christine Henderson

As ATS member institutions across the US and Canada prepare for the 2020–2021 academic year, many administrators seek creative solutions to offer a comprehensive and robust new student orientation program while limiting in-person interactions.

Coordinating a shift from an established, routine, in-person orientation program to an online version can be time consuming with many considerations. This article seeks to provide a set of helpful tips for practitioners in the development or enhancement of their institutions' online orientation resources.

Determine the goals for orientation

- Include both the explicit and implicit curriculum of orientation.

- Orientation often includes disseminating information, connecting students to resources and key personnel, and forming community among a new cohort of students.

Determine the best format for achieving each goal

- Connecting to key personnel might include video introductions and/or a synchronous chat session that helps new students to feel connected to and comfortable reaching out to key resources.

- Forming community might involve small groups of students meeting regularly with faculty or staff (perhaps advising groups) in the weeks leading up to the start of the semester. It might involve teaching content related to the values of the community.

- Disseminating information might be done in an interactive way.

- A checklist of tasks to complete on the website or a resource center; incorporate rewards for those who complete certain tasks.

Identify existing resources

- To the greatest extent possible, don't reinvent the wheel. Schools likely have many helpful resources at the ready such as library tutorials, FAQ's, or other user-friendly videos or documents that can be compiled.

Allow ample time for students to absorb information

- An ideal timeframe for the dissemination of information is four to six weeks prior to the start of the academic year.

- Presenting new information in an asynchronous fashion for some material will enable students to self-pace through the program and even refer back to the information in the coming months.

Use a feedback mechanism for program assessment

- Develop a short and simple survey to glean the orientation presentation's effectiveness and to identify additional information future students might find helpful.

Join a SPAN learning community on this topic to explore and discuss ideas

- Through the ATS Student Personnel Administrators' Network (SPAN), we are coordinating a learning community of ATS member school student personnel responsible for new student orientation. Beginning in July, we will meet via Zoom for one or more sessions to exchange ideas and assist one another with developing creative solutions aimed to assist students in acclimating to theological education in an online or hybrid environment. For more information, contact Christine Henderson at chenderson@ctu.edu

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