

7 Steps to a Virtual Orientation That Won't Bore Students

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As the administrators in charge of orientation for new students in our graduate school, we were naturally apprehensive about welcoming them to a virtual campus this fall. Several months into the pandemic, everyone is suffering from “Zoom fatigue.” Glitches, awkwardness, boring content — by now, we’ve all experienced the bad side of videoconferencing. But with our campus staying virtual, our new-student orientation had to be online, too.

We planned an all-day Zoom program, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., for 57 students across three master’s programs. Our faculty colleagues were dreading it (and quite frankly, so were we). Nonetheless, our team dug in, prepared carefully, and hoped for the best. To our great relief, our students and faculty members were so enthused by the end of the program that they remained on Zoom even longer to socialize.

What we designed clearly worked, and with pandemic restrictions to be expected well into 2021, we want to share the tips and tricks we deployed.

Step 1: Eat your veggies first. Orientation is often where basic rules, requirements, and details of campus services — i.e., the “veggies” — are communicated to students. Instead of force-feeding that information live, we decided to preserve the Zoom sessions for interaction and relationship-building. We created a self-paced course on Blackboard and asked new graduate students to complete it *before* the live orientation. The course introduced the nuts and bolts of our programs and our graduate school to incoming students, focusing on their readiness for remote learning, on their study plans, and on the discussion boards available for them to interact with one another. We also filmed warm, welcoming videos that we hoped would help to humanize professors and administrators and convey to students that we were approachable. We included quizzes and assignments in the self-paced course to ensure that students were absorbing information.

Step 2: Treat the virtual event like a real event. Plan, rehearse, tech check, and rehearse again. As with any successful event, the more you prepare the more seamless the experience will be, and the more adaptable you as the host will be when things go wrong — as they always do during any live event, in person or online. All of the speakers, including faculty members, must participate in the rehearsals and tech checks to be sure that they all have optimal sound, lighting, and internet connections. Rehearsals also ensure that each speaker feels confident in the schedule and expectations of how the event will play out. The last thing you want is a professor loudly asking, in front of your new students, “What is supposed to happen next?”

Step 3: Keep it simple. We used a single Zoom link for the entire event — for the plenary and all the breakout sessions. We even kept the same Zoom room open during breaks. We timed each break (at least one every hour), timed each segment, timed each speaker, and timed each video to ensure we remained on schedule. We wanted to avoid any attendee getting “lost” in Zoom rooms, so we had a staff member dedicated to overseeing the Zoom breakouts. That person was armed with lists of participants for each session, and could troubleshoot when students accidentally left a room or got disconnected and needed to be guided from a plenary session to a breakout session, and back. We did all of that without having attendees log in and out of different links.

Step 4: Don’t take it too seriously. Yes, this is an orientation for a serious higher-education program, but it’s also your first opportunity to build relationships and introduce the new students to the culture of your campus and city. Our team created a few silly videos to lighten the mood: We opened the event with a slide counting down the start time, played to the theme song from Gen Z’s favorite “retro” show, *The Office*. That generated a lot of amused buzz in our chat space. At each break, we played the cheesiest elevator music we could find, and by the end of the day, attendees were dancing and singing along to the jazzy tunes.

Step 5: Find the right balance of live and prerecorded content. All of us hosting events virtually are constantly struggling to balance live with prerecorded content. Word of

warning: One mistake that some meeting planners make is to try to stream videos during their Zoom event. But that can lead to participants staring awkwardly at the screen, waiting for the videos to load. Instead we downloaded videos we planned to show ahead of time and strategically mixed them into the program, thus reducing the risk of tech failure in the middle of the orientation.

Step 6: Use interactive tools to build community. We mixed in every possible interaction tool we had at our disposal to get people talking during the orientation. We took advantage of Zoom’s chat feature, led by professors who were eager to get to know their new students. A faculty member commented, “in what other space could we be delivering content and have over 500 chats in the first hour of an event?” We polled students at every point in the program about how it was going, especially at moments where we felt a topic might be a little dry or lead to a dip in engagement. Instead of a hard break for lunch, we randomly assigned students into a lunch room to chat as they virtually shared a meal. After lunch, we used Zoom’s annotation feature to let students share what they ate. And we ended the program with a word cloud about our graduate school’s mission, built from each of the cohort breakouts and presented by faculty members.

Step 7: Don’t ever go back to the ballroom. Virtual orientation was surprisingly enjoyable. It was also surprisingly effective. We met goals we had never achieved during our previous in-person orientation programs: 100-percent attendance (of both students and faculty members), lots of networking, zero food waste, and we saved thousands of dollars. Post-pandemic, we will need to decide how much of our remote adaptations to retain, and how much we will return to the old ways of welcoming new students. Once we can safely gather in person again, we may just decide to keep the orientation virtual and tack on an in-person social hour afterward.

The larger lesson: Maybe forcing students, staff members, and professors into a cold ballroom for eight hours is one campus activity that we will leave behind for good.

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