

Engineering Virtual Orientation Program

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GIFTS Paper: Virtual Orientation Program

In Summer 2020, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the [Name of Office] in [Name of College] shifted to convert all New Student Orientation Programs from an in-person format to a virtual format. The purpose of this brief paper is to highlight the various elements of the Engineering Virtual Orientation Program. In particular, we provide information about the technology platforms utilized, discuss strategies implemented to create a flipped advising model, and outline ways in which promising practices from Summer 2020 will be carried forward to future orientation cohorts both during and beyond the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Traditional orientation programs have historically taken place on campus and material has been covered in full during the in-person event. During Summer 2020, our office drew upon the flipped advising approach (Kuhn, Gordon, & Webber, 2006) to create meaningful activities that took place electronically prior to students' scheduled orientation date. These activities took place via an online Education Learning System (i.e., Canvas) and utilized modules with interactive videos, presentations, and quizzes which assessed students' learning outcomes. We then revamped our day-of activities to reflect on the online modules. This process allowed our team to reinvision the orientation process in order to create meaningful interactions via Zoom during the day-of program.

Academic advising for our virtual orientations took place via Zoom through breakout rooms. The [Name of College] has ten different academic majors (including Undecided Engineering). During each program, we advised up to 80 total students. Therefore, in order to provide small advising spaces for students, our team broke the advising into four different sections. In order to separate each major, we created three separate Zoom calls, utilizing breakout rooms in order to ensure a smaller group for students. Through this organizational method, we were able to provide tailored academic advising to each student who attended our sessions.

The virtual orientation process is limited given that the advising experience is group-based as opposed to one-on-one advising. Some first-year students felt more intimidated asking questions in a group Zoom setting than they would in person. Also, the student experience varied based on their breakout room and their advisor's comfort with technology. In order for our sessions to be successful, we had to ensure we had a clear and concise communication plan.

Practitioners interested in implementing a virtual program utilizing a flipped advising model should carefully consider what information is most important to share with incoming students. This information should be clearly communicated via the Modules but also must be reiterated through live sessions. For example, our team facilitated a Q&A session with students in order to emphasize important policies and academic information. Therefore, information was reinforced both before and during the live Zoom sessions.

In facilitating future orientations, advisors should focus on allocating time within the advising session to build community and a sense of belonging among students by incorporating group introductions and an ice breaker.