

Bringing Back In-Person, On-Campus New Student Orientation

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I am writing about my concerns with the fact that the University has abandoned the traditional model of an on-campus Orientation in favor of an almost strictly on-line model. I have been an academic advisor for more than 20 years, and over the decades I have seen multiple models of the Freshman Orientation; some of them successful, some of them not. Throughout the years, and even into today, I have had hundreds of students tell me that CU wasn't even on their radar until they came to campus and saw how beautiful it was. Why on earth would we take one of our biggest selling points (the beauty of our campus) and COMPLETELY undermine that by not having students come to campus? That is the very definition of folly.

About five years ago I thought that we had finally achieved a perfect Orientation model. Parents and students were asked to come to campus for two days, where they would hear a variety of programming geared towards their interests (for example, parents would attend a seminar run by Wardenburg and the Bursar's Office about health insurance and bill paying; two important topics that parents are very interested in, but which may not hold the attention of most students). Although I have plentiful anecdotal evidence that parents are really upset that they're not getting this information directly anymore, my focus in this paper will be on the student experience.

There are three main features of the on-campus Orientation that I think are extremely valuable from my perspective as an academic advisor:

1. In the most recent iteration of Orientation, each First-Year advisor got to meet with the exact students to whom they would be assigned during the upcoming year. Copious research has shown that the number one key to success for a First-Year (FY) student is an early and meaningful contact with a responsible adult on campus. By meeting with my students in June, July and August, we were already establishing a relationship that, rather than beginning with the fall semester, simply *continued* with the fall semester. When a student arrived on campus, they had already spoken with me (or another advisor who told them who I was) and had my name and contact information, especially important during the chaotic and confusing first days of class.
2. There was a strong consistency of message. Even if the students' retention of information presented at Orientation was minimal, at least I knew EXACTLY what each and every student had been told. This allowed me to present a continuity of a knowledge base that I could tell my students was expected for them to know. It was very easy to say: "Okay, we presented this information to you at Orientation; let's review and see how much you remember."
3. This is the most important point of all. The second and final day of Orientation was devoted to a registration lab, where students would register for classes in a lab fully staffed by advisors. They

were not allowed to leave campus until they had a schedule that had been examined and approved by an advisor.

NONE of these three extremely important points are being addressed any more. Although it's true that it was not physically possible to see *all* of my students during a summer session, I was able to connect with a significantly larger portion of my students than I do now. Also, currently, advising appointments are NOT required, and many students simply choose not to connect with an advisor which, as has been amply demonstrated, works against their best interest whether they know it or not. With the current model, the vast majority of my students do not know who I am when they get to campus, a complete (and unfortunate) reversal of the previous model, which, as I stated above, has been shown to be crucial for retention efforts.

To the second point, the current model allows for a wide variety of approaches to the advising appointment, which has led to wildly divergent outcomes. The students with whom I personally have connected are armed with exactly the information I feel is necessary to be successful in the first semester of college, but the results for other students (thanks to the large number of potential advisors who could have contacted them over the summer) are extremely inconsistent. In an in-person presentation, a Power Point helps to keep everyone on-message and consistent. How a student gets to graduation is up to their individual departmental advisor, but I feel that it is extremely important for every FY student to arrive on campus with a "Minimum Academic Advising Preparation Standard."

And finally, I cannot stress how important it was to have the students leave with a full, advisor-approved schedule. I only have anecdotal information, but the Fall 2017 semester was a nightmare for many students; for instance, I spoke with one student who was only enrolled in three credit hours (the three that a CU advisor had enrolled him in), because "I just thought someone would put me in some classes, I wondered what was taking so long." He had ONE class on the first day of the semester because for some reason he didn't get the message how this works. That would have been impossible in the previous model. Anecdotally, I have also encountered numerous other students who were enrolled in a less-than-full-time schedule for similar reasons.

That's the view from an advising perspective, but what about a student/parent perspective?

1. Many future CU students are NOT ideologically committed to CU when they're just coming out of high school. They tour multiple campuses across the United States, and, because CU is one of the few online-only models in the entire country, those students are making strong, physical connections to OTHER CAMPUSES because they haven't visited Boulder. How many students are we NOT getting because they didn't come to our campus? As I mentioned above, I have spoken with hundreds of students who, when I have asked them why they came to CU, their answer has been some variation of: "I wasn't even thinking about it until I came out here to visit my friend, and I immediately fell in love with the campus." With SO many students sharing that experience, it seems sad and unfortunate that we are no longer requiring our students to experience one of our greatest assets.

2. The new generation of students does NOT have the tolerance or patience for long-winded online presentations. Again, I only have anecdotal evidence, but I have spoken with dozens of students who aren't getting anything out of the online orientation; they "get through it" as fast as possible so they can talk to a REAL, LIVE HUMAN BEING. And I get that! And when I tell them how things used to be, to a person every student laments how they wish it still were still that way. They're online ALL DAY; they certainly don't want to be online to learn about college. They crave a human connection, and the current model is not supplying that.
3. I get two reactions from parents when they hear that being on campus is not required: First of all, they are either surprised that's the case ("We're looking at several schools, and they ALL have an on-campus component, why don't you?"), or, based on past experiences, they're actually sad (I hear variations on "I went there and I was really looking forward to coming back to campus" or "Our eldest daughter went to Orientation, why aren't we doing it now?"). More importantly, they ALSO crave that human experience: A name, a face and a phone number of someone they can contact if they have questions, be it in Admissions, the Bursar's Office, or Academic Advising. During the two-day Orientation model, they had ample opportunity to meet people and make connections; now, they have to look things up online just like everyone else. It's as impersonal as it gets.

And finally, one of the BEST things that a parent could receive on campus was the satisfaction that there were loads of people here to help their students. They could see the army of advisors and other professionals that love to help out, and you could always feel a tangible sense of relief knowing that they could leave their son or daughter here in Boulder, and they'd be taken care of by one of the great people that they met. That personal connection is now gone.

I have heard many counter-arguments for why we have gone to the online model, the biggest one being that it is too expensive to expect families to come to Boulder during the summer. I reject that argument completely, and this is why: if a student is going to be a CU student, they have to come to campus at least once, in August. And that's why the August Orientation was, BY FAR the biggest one of all. I understand that coming to Boulder twice in one summer may be a financial burden, so the August Orientation is a perfect solution to that; the parents and students only have to come ONCE, just days before class starts. And again, this is only anecdotal, but I would guess that those families are in a small minority; I have talked to dozens of other families who built their entire "family vacation to Colorado" around the Orientation schedule.

How about those parents who cannot take off two (or more) workdays? I have spoken with many other advisors who would be happy to do an abbreviated Saturday Orientation to accommodate those folks. And why are we not setting up a "scholarship" fund to help pay travel expenses? We could work with Financial Aid to identify the neediest families and help to pay a portion of their Orientation expenses. What sort of great public relations would that be?

Also, I am quite sure that Orientation provided a huge boost to the Boulder economy, especially to businesses on the Hill, or to the Bookstore selling “Proud Parent” T-shirts. Why are we not working with these local businesses to provide advertising and funding? I am sure that many companies would be happy to help fund Orientation, because they know that they will see a many-fold return in profit once hundreds of people start wandering around on the Hill again, looking for a good place to eat.

I do believe that I have made my point, although rest assured that I could go on for many more pages providing anecdotal information on why things need to go back to the old Orientation model. Rather than provide a long-winded summary, I will simply end with this: The “New Student Welcome” online model is deeply flawed and does not work, and we MUST return to an “on campus” Orientation, which provided benefits so deep and so profound that they were missed immediately when we abandoned that model.