



# Postsecondary Orientation Practices and Equity Considerations: A Resource Review by the CTE CoLab

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# Contents

How Should the Resource Review Be Used?	2
About the Resource Reviews	2
<b>Overview</b>	<b>3</b>
Orientation: Key Takeaways	3
<b>Value of Orientation</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Online and Hybrid Orientation</b>	<b>5</b>
Gamifying Orientation Can Be Popular and Fun for Students	6
Considerations to Advance Equity	6
<b>Implementation Considerations</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Additional Resources</b>	<b>9</b>
Studies	9
Toolkits and Resources	10
Orientation Gamification Literature	10
<b>Notes</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>14</b>

**The purpose of this resource review is to describe what we know about the value of orientation programs in the postsecondary context, considerations for structuring online and hybrid orientation programs, considerations to advance equity, and other implementation strategies.**

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### **How Should the Resource Review Be Used?**

This resource review provides information on orientation in the postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) context. It contains key takeaways from the literature and links to resources that the Urban Institute compiled to support community and technical colleges participating in the [Career and Technical Education CoLab \(CTE CoLab\)](#), a research-informed community of practice that focuses on building knowledge for the field. Colleges participating in the CTE CoLab are working to refine and implement equity action plans, which identify goals and strategies for advancing racial equity at the programmatic and institutional level aligned with the needs of their college.<sup>1</sup> The CTE CoLab aims to reduce disparities in academic and career outcomes for historically marginalized students—especially students who are Black, Latinx, or Indigenous—enrolled in online and hybrid postsecondary career-focused programs. The Urban Institute team developed resource reviews on mentoring, orientation and culturally sensitive research to support colleges in implementing strategies to advance equity.

### **About the Resource Reviews**

Each resource review features key takeaways and considerations for practitioners interested in developing and implementing postsecondary programs with an equity lens. Rather than conducting a systematic review or endorsing a particular approach, the Urban Institute has aggregated resources to provide information on where to learn more, so that readers can do a deeper dive into the topics that are most interesting and relevant to them. By building on available evidence, knowledge, and experience from the field, practitioners and policymakers using this resource review can consider available options and potential approaches to address student needs and improve outcomes for students of color and other historically marginalized groups. Strategies designed to meet the needs of students who face barriers can also yield benefits for all students.

# Overview

Colleges use orientations to provide students opportunities to learn more about their school and impart information about the college experience, such as how to schedule courses, navigate physical and virtual campus spaces, and access academic and student support services. Orientations also give an opportunity to meet other students to build community and belonging. Programmatic orientations share specific resources geared toward a program's goals, show students how they will move through their courses, and identify available resources while allowing students to meet the faculty, staff, and students in the same program. This resource review will summarize considerations for different aspects of orientation, including practices that have emerged since COVID-19 for online and hybrid orientation.

## Orientation: Key Takeaways

- **Value of orientation:** Orientations allow students to understand expectations and how and where to get the assistance they need. Orientations are associated with improvements in student grades and improved retention.
- **Online and hybrid orientation:** Orientations can be delivered in person or online. Online orientations should be designed to be inclusive, accessible, and responsive to student preferences and needs, including by taking steps to replicate the in-person environment and finding ways to engage students. Consider content for orientations that will demonstrate to students what success in their online or hybrid environment looks like. Also, show what resources are available to students and where they can find them. Colleges can explore ways to make orientation fun and relevant through gamification, but it should be carefully crafted to ensure the desired result (e.g., more students using student resources like tutoring, advising, financial aid, food pantry, etc.).
- **Considerations to advance equity:** Design online and hybrid orientations to be inclusive and promote diversity and equity within your student body by incorporating people from diverse backgrounds into all orientation materials and on the orientation team and having culturally responsive activities. Find ways to engage students in the design of orientations through focus groups, interviews, feedback forms, and pre- and post-orientation surveys.
- **Implementation considerations:** Other factors to consider include how orientations are broken up into programmatic or college level orientations, incorporating topics that students want to learn more about, testing their knowledge, how to align advising with orientation programming, and keeping orientation programs up to date.

# Value of Orientation

Orientation is a beneficial tool for acclimating first-year students to their college experience. Orientation is often the first activity new students participate in that communicates how they will move through college.<sup>2</sup> Having an orientation program allows students to understand the new sets of expectations that are being placed on them and how and where to get the assistance they need, whether it is academic, financial, or other support (Hunter 2006; Wake and Bunn 2015).

- A study on the impact of an online orientation program on student success at Bergen Community College indicated that **students who completed the online orientation had a slightly higher grade point average and higher retention rates** than students that did not utilize it (Lerner Colucci and Grebing 2020).
- A 2009 evaluation of a new mandatory online orientation at Richland Community College for first-time online and hybrid students showed that **there was a 7.7 percentage point increase in retention of online students when orientation was moved from in-person and optional to online and mandatory**. Faculty noted that students were more prepared for their online environment and experienced fewer technical issues. The college's online help desk also saw a decrease in tickets the first two weeks of the semester. Student surveys indicated that 87 percent felt confident to very confident that they understood how to be successful in an online course and 93 percent felt confident to very confident that they could navigate the learning management system (LMS) for their online courses (Jones 2013). Jacobs (2010) also found that orientation can increase the retention of students from year to year.
- **Orientations can also be a launch-point for students to begin building a sense of community with their peers** (Jacobs 2010). Peer-to-peer interaction is a vital aspect of orientation. Other benefits to orientation include a more collaborative and supportive learning environment, increased communication with faculty, and increased use of supportive services (National Survey of Student Engagement 2005).

# Online and Hybrid Orientation

Orientations can be delivered in person, online, and in a hybrid format. Increasingly, since the COVID-19 pandemic, orientations have been delivered online. Take the following points into consideration for designing online or hybrid delivery of orientations.

- **Online and hybrid orientation should be accessible** via smartphones for students who do not have other technology available to them before the start of the term. Ensure that content is also accessible for students with disabilities: videos should have readable closed captioning, with audio that is loud enough for those with auditory impairments (McGowan 2018).
- **Students have indicated that they want online orientation activities to mirror in-person ones** (Kopko and Griffin 2020). In a recent orientation survey, college students reflected that even if orientation was conducted in an online or hybrid setting, the programming should allow students to meet and interact with other students.<sup>3</sup> Most in-person orientations have a portion that allows students to meet their faculty, staff, and advisors, as well as other students. Having meet-and-greets geared toward students getting to network with other students online are important for building students' sense of community. Students still seek connections with their peers online, and colleges should think about ways to foster connections between them in online settings. In addition, students often ask their peers for help before they ask faculty or staff, so ensuring they feel connected to other students in their courses or programs can lead to better outcomes.
- **Online formats should prepare students for how classes will operate in their online or hybrid settings.** Students benefit from lessons on how to use the LMS and activities where students submit assignments, access materials or attachments, participate in discussions, and communicate with their professors or peers (e.g., use of direct messaging) (McGowan 2018; Jones 2013). Many schools that have online orientations host them directly on their LMS. In addition, topics like computer or software requirements for online courses, how to be a successful online student, student expectations, online student services, career information or degree pathways, and how to access resources are also helpful for online students (Jones 2013; Spaulding et al. 2023).
- **Consider when to offer orientation, how to make it engaging, and how to build steps in the student registration process into the orientation.**

One college found more success requiring orientation at the beginning of the intake process, before scheduling courses (Jaggars and Fletcher 2014). That orientation was held online, in video format with interactive activities. Any in-person activities students needed to complete were done in one morning or afternoon on campus. In the last phase, students completed class registration and payment online.

Another college made online orientation available to students within an hour of registering for their online or hybrid courses (Jones 2013). It was self-paced, but each of the 10 modules required the students to complete an interactive activity before moving onto the next module. Other content included computer requirements; how to be a successful online student; online student services; and navigating,

communicating, and submitting assignments in the LMS. The last module included a test in which students had to score 80 or above to complete the orientation (with unlimited attempts). Students were not able to begin their online/hybrid courses until they had completed the orientation.

## Gamifying Orientation Can Be Popular and Fun for Students

Colleges can also “gamify” their orientations by adding game-like elements to encourage student engagement. One orientation app called Orientation Passport included three layers: the game layer (achievements and levels), the context layer (check-in to an event, add a “friend” to your profile—similar to social media), and the utility layer (elements like events, a map of campus, friend lists) (Fitz-Walter et al. 2011).

**Making orientation fun:** Opportunities to add fun elements into orientation include creating digital incentives for completing tasks like watching orientation videos or modules, where students can earn points to get campus t-shirts or other giveaway items.<sup>4</sup> Colleges can make activities into competitions where the first “X” number of students get a gift card. Other suggested events include trivia related to orientation and scavenger hunts that help students explore campus<sup>5</sup>—which could be applied to a virtual “campus” as well.

**Interaction is paramount:** this can take the form of interactive maps of campus, interactive games/quizzes on support services, and games/quizzes on the online tools students are expected to use (Minhas-Taneja 2017). Students can undertake an “email challenge,” where they learn how to use their student email account, including how often they should check it, and an interactive financial literacy quiz.

## Considerations to Advance Equity

When planning and designing online or hybrid orientation programming, consider how to make equitable design choices that incorporate student feedback and reflect the diversity of the student body. The planning of an orientation program should consider the following:

- **Design orientations to be inclusive and promote diversity and equity within your student body** (Boening and Miller 2005).
  - Show why diversity is critical. For example, show that graduates with higher salaries demonstrated behaviors that promote diversity.
  - Spend time on expected student behaviors.
  - Incorporate people from diverse backgrounds in materials.
  - Have diverse orientation team leaders from similar backgrounds as the students.
  - If students are leading groups or featured in videos during orientation, they should reflect the student body population.
  - Interactive activities like discussions and discussion boards should also be culturally responsive.
- **Incorporate feedback from students on what should be included in their orientations and how to improve on current practices.**



- Conduct focus groups with students or administer student surveys after orientation (McGowan 2018; Pecoraro et al. 2022).
- Consider how your institution can incentivize students to take feedback surveys, by providing extra credit or offering class time to take the survey. Collaborate with institutional research departments to pull online retention rates pre- and post-orientation redesign. In addition, explore other administrative data, like help desk tickets and the utilization rates of services described in the orientation.
- Speak to faculty and staff about their perceptions of how students are improving or are more confident beginning online or hybrid courses and/or if academic advisors can meet with students more consistently.

# Implementation Considerations

The following additional factors should be considered when colleges are designing orientation programming, aligning advising with orientation, and ensuring that programming is kept up to date.

- **Break up orientation into “meta-majors”**—for example, creating a health science orientation rather than just a nursing orientation so that that students can get a better understanding of similar pathways and the opportunities available to students within those fields of study (Jenkins et al. 2020). Many colleges implement either one large new student orientation or a programmatic orientation for each major.
- **Offer workshops on specific topics that students are interested in learning** (examples in one article included living on campus or off campus, and how curved grading works).<sup>6</sup> These can complement information provided through orientation.
- **Include quizzes that test information learned** (McGowan 2018). Allow students to take assessments multiple times (Jones 2013).
- **Consider how advising should be scaffolded to align with your college’s orientation practices.** If students are signing up for classes the day before orientation, what are the mechanisms available for students to meet with their advisors (Jenkins et al. 2020)? Some community colleges are implementing mandatory check-ins with advisors at 15, 30, and 45 credits.<sup>7</sup>
- **Update orientation materials frequently** (e.g., twice a year) to ensure effectiveness by reviewing student feedback surveys, college administrative data, and feedback from faculty and staff (Jones 2013). When referring students to school websites or LMS portals, ensure the information on the sites is timely and accurate (Pecoraro et al. 2022).

# Additional Resources

## Studies

**Kona Renee Jones, “Developing and Implementing a Mandatory Online Student Orientation” (Needham, MA: Sloan Consortium, 2013).**

- This evaluation provided many of the insights about effective online orientations noted above, based on experiences at Richland Community College. |

**Shanna Smith Jaggars and Jeffrey Fletcher, “Redesigning the Student Intake and Information Provision Processes at a Large Comprehensive Community College” (New York: Community College Research Center, 2014).**

- This report discusses how a community college incorporated feedback from their instructors, counselors, and students on what was not working with the intake process.

**Veronica McGowan, “An Investigation into Web-Based Presentations of Institutional Online Learning Orientations” (Phoenix, AR: Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching at Grand Canyon University, 2018).**

- This study was conducted by examining the orientation web pages of 65 institutions, including community colleges, universities, and graduate programs. It identified five subareas that arose from coding the content of online orientations including: getting started in an online environment, technical requirements for online learning, success strategies in online learning, help topics, and institution-specific information.

**Davis Jenkins, Hana Lahr, Lauren Pellegrino, Elizabeth M. Kopko, and Sarah Griffin, “Redesigning Community College Student Onboarding Through Guided Pathways” (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2020).**

- This series from the Community College Research Center examines new student onboarding. It has orientation recommendations for community colleges, student perspectives on reformed processes, planning exercises to guide the redesign process, and one-page features on three community colleges that have successfully implemented new student onboarding processes.

## Toolkits and Resources

Becky Boyd, Liz Largent, and Susan Rondeau, “[New Student Orientation—Community College Orientation Basics: How to Structure a New Student Orientation Program](#)” (Manhattan, KS: NACADA at Kansas State University, 2008).

- This blog post from the National Academic Advising Association features questions institutions should be asking as they think about implementing or modifying the structure of their orientations.

Alex Pecoraro, Meg Foster, Sonny Nguyen, and Benjamin Barboza, “[Online Orientation For 2-Year Colleges: 5 Strategies for Success](#)” (Boulder, CO: Innovative Educators, 2022).

- This presentation includes two community colleges discussing their challenges and solutions in providing online orientation for their students.

## Orientation Gamification Literature

Zachary Fitz-Walter, Dian Tjondronegoro, and Peta Wyeth, “[Orientation Passport: Using Gamification to Engage University Students](#)” (2011).

- Presented at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Australian Computer-Human Interaction Conference, this report examined an online orientation app pilot that was used in Australia called Orientation Passport. With gamification, all participants completed at least 4 achievements, with 82 percent of participants completing more than 10. All but one participant felt that the achievement system added value to their orientation experience. Note that even though this orientation used an app, students were still on campus using it and going to in-person events and meetups.

Stephanie Chandra, “[14 Ways to Gamify Student Engagement & Learning](#),” CampusGroups.com.

- This blog post suggests various ways colleges can make orientation more interactive.

Vandana Minhas-Taneja, “[Interactive Online Student Transition to University](#)” (Copacabana, AUS: Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association, 2017).

- Discusses a New Zealand university adding gamification to their online orientation processes. They saw student engagement and satisfaction with orientation increase.

Steven H. Wong, “[The Impact of an Online Gamified Orientation Program on Underrepresented Undergraduate STEM Students: A Case Study](#)” (Jersey City, NJ: New Jersey City University, 2021).

- This dissertation discussed a STEM program modifying their orientation program to add gamification elements and transition the orientation to an online format during COVID-19.

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Advancing Racial Equity in Hybrid and Online Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs: A Summary of Equity Action Plans in the CTE CoLab Initiative” captures the work of a previous cohort, which ran from June 2021 to April 2023. It can be found at the CTE CoLab website, <https://ctecolab.org>.
- <sup>2</sup> “What is College Orientation for First-Year Students?” College Board, September 18, 2023, <https://blog.collegeboard.org/what-college-orientation-first-year-students>.
- <sup>3</sup> Colleen Flaherty, “Students’ Insights on Orientation,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 31, 2023, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2023/08/31/survey-what-college-students-want-orientation>.
- <sup>4</sup> Stephanie Chandra, “14 Ways to Gamify Student Engagement & Learning,” CampusGroups.com, July 1, 2021, <https://blog.campusgroups.com/campusgroups/2021/5/25/gamify-student-engagement-and-learning>.
- <sup>5</sup> Stephanie Chandra, “14 Ways to Gamify Student Engagement & Learning.”
- <sup>6</sup> Colleen Flaherty, “Students’ Insights on Orientation.”
- <sup>7</sup> “Onboarding at Alamo Colleges District,” CCRC Packet on Redesigning Community College Student Onboarding Through Guided Pathways, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, May 2020, accessed July 17, 2024, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/redesigning-community-college-onboarding-guided-pathways-profile-alamo.pdf>.

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