



FOSTERING A SENSE OF BELONGING IN A REMOTE ENVIRONMENT: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM COVID-19 PRACTICES?

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Abstract:

With University of Utah orientation moving to a virtual format in response to COVID-19, first-year students had a very different orientation experience in comparison to students in previous summers. This change could impact a student's sense of belonging: orientation now has self-guided components, as opposed to in-person facilitation. With this move to online, we examined if it was still possible to create a sense of belonging on a virtual platform such as Zoom. Undergraduate researchers spent 12 weeks recording students' level of interaction through Zoom sessions. From this, we were able to determine that a camera being on greatly impacts a student's level of participation in virtual sessions.

Intro:

One of the goals of orientation at the University of Utah is to help new students gain a sense of belonging before starting classes for the semester. The Office of Orientation & Transition "...believes each student deserves to have a college experience" that instills love for their *alma mater* (University of Utah Office of Orientation and Transition, 2020). Students learn about campus, register for classes in labs, get to know about different resources, learn U of U traditions like the Utah fight song, "Utah Fan," or "Third Down Jump," and much more. American scholar and researcher Terrell Strayhorn writes, "A sense of belonging is associated with numerous positive, prosocial, and productive outcomes in domains such as education" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 10). If students feel like they belong on campus, they are more likely to be aware of resources or seek help, increasing their success as students and ultimately leading to greater retention. Traditionally, orientation has been offered in a predominantly face-to-face format. However, because of COVID-19, the U's orientation sessions were moved to a virtual format for summer 2020: students completed modules within our learning management system and met with advisors via phone and video appointments.

In these new formats, it becomes difficult or impossible to offer some of the physical features of orientation that may create a sense of belonging, such as seeing campus and Salt Lake City before the fall semester starts. We sought to examine whether or not it's possible to contribute to a student's sense of belonging in a virtual format. Additionally, we asked if making oneself visible in a virtual platform (such as Zoom) helps foster additional feelings of belonging. Overall, our research seeks to determine optimal strategies for facilitating a sense of belonging for new students.

Method:

In order to gauge and measure student responsiveness in a virtual format, we contacted incoming freshmen who attended a virtual Major Exploration Session offered by the Academic

Advising Center. The sessions were co-hosted by a full-time academic advisor and an undergraduate researcher. From these Zoom sessions, we noted how many students chose to turn their camera on or off. We also sent a follow-up email with relevant resources, and noted the number of students who did or did not respond.

Students who responded to the follow-up emails from the Major Exploration Sessions were asked the following questions:

1. Did you have your camera on during the Major Exploration Sessions? Yes, no, or sometimes?
2. Did other participants have their camera on during the session? All or mostly all, very few or none, or somewhere in the middle?
3. (LIKERT SCALE) I felt connected to the other participants in my session. Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree?
4. (LIKERT SCALE) I felt comfortable sharing with the group in the session. Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree?

Results:

We recorded the number of sessions, the number of students who registered, the number who attended, and the number of responses to the follow-up emails. The results are shown in the table below.

Major Exploration Sessions

	# of sessions each researcher attended	# of students that registered	# of students that attended	# of cameras that were on during the session	# of responses to follow-up emails
Researcher #1	9	48	35	30	0
Researcher #2	11	55	39	33	0

Although a significant number of students participated in the sessions, no students responded to the follow-up emails.

Discussion:

We found that a student's camera being on or off was linked to how much a student participated during the session. When their camera was on, the student was more likely to engage. Since the students did not respond to any of our emails, we couldn't draw any conclusions regarding the connection between likelihood of response and camera status.

We learned that even in a virtual format, students seemed more comfortable sharing and participating when they could see the faces of the people they were interacting with. The researchers observed that a student's camera being on made the experience more personable for everyone, including the advisors and undergraduate researchers. We observed that students were more likely to respond to questions, there was more participation, and discussion was more robust. For example, we observed that students shared anecdotes from their personal lives or high school experiences.

Now that we know that students respond positively when virtual learning is made personable, this should be incorporated more fully going forward into another virtual semester. Based on our observations, the researchers would strongly recommend that the organizers of future virtual orientation sessions encourage all participants to turn on their cameras. If we were to replicate this study on a larger scale, we would quantify the participants' level of interaction as a function of whether the camera was on or off. These results would provide further guidance for virtual orientation.

References

Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). 2: Insights from Literature and Research. In *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (p. 10). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.

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