Converting a Dynamic in-Person Experience to Remote Life: College Transition in the Time of COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions in every sector of business and higher education, and student affairs was not immune to these effects. The unprecedented disturbances to business-as-normal forced student affairs professionals to find innovative ways to welcome new students into their universities. This article details the monumental programmatic changes employed, the challenges faced, and lessons learned by the New Student Orientation and First-Year Experiences teams at the University of Colorado Denver. While catalyzed by unfortunate circumstances and necessity, many of the new ideas and methods developed during 2020 will be adopted as mainstays in STFE's suite of operations and programmatic offerings.

Keywords: students in transition, academic integration, social integration, belonging, orientation program, summer bridge program, COVID-19, faculty and instructor training

In 2019, the University of Colorado Denver (CU Denver) formed the Student Transitions and Family Engagement (STFE) team, which includes New Student Orientation, First-Year Experiences, Peer Advocate Leaders, the Parent and Family Program, Transfer Initiatives, and the Center for Undergraduate Exploration and Advising. With the alignment of these units, the STFE team in 2020 served students, parents, guests, and community stakeholders in a larger and more collaborative capacity. STFE units saw an overall increase in offerings, including advising opportunities, first-year experience courses, orientation options, student training, peer advocate responsibilities, along with the continued increase in transfer student opportunities and cross-institutional academic pathways.

In March 2020, in response to the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, CU Denver transitioned to remote operations. The New Student Orientation (NSO) staff had nine days to fully convert the Advising Day program (NSO Day 1) to an online remote format. Additionally, plans and implementation for the summer bridge program, Lynx Summer Academy, had to be reimagined. Eventually, FYE course delivery and support also had to be converted to virtual or hybrid formats. This article outlines our process to convert to remote programming and student support; discusses challenges, wins, and areas of opportunity moving forward; and highlights the

importance of collaboration to support students in transition. We open with a brief discussion of the theories that guide our work.

Conceptual Framework

The work of the STFE team is framed through theories that offer guidance on how students experience and move through college. By using academic and social integration (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975), belonging (Strayhorn, 2018), and transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995), STFE strives to create and implement programs, initiatives, and resources that assist in a student's transition into CU Denver. This work did not stop as the university converted to a remote environment; rather, it adapted to meet the evolving demands of our context and the needs of our students. How each of these theories guides our work is described briefly.

Academic and Social Integration

Tinto (1975) argued that academic and social integration could influence a student's persistence in college. Structural dimensions, the standards of the institution, normative dimensions, and a student's identification within the academic system all are aspects of academic integration (Tinto). Social integration is about the congruence of the student and the social system—both at the college and subculture level (Tinto). Braxton and colleagues (2004) added that factors influencing a student's social integration could include: student welfare, communal potential, institutional integrity, proactive social adjustment, and psychosocial adjustment. A student's initial exposure to their institution is impacted by how they perceive both academic and social opportunities and connections. For this reason, the work of orientation, transition, and retention teams on college campuses must be mindful and intentional in how they work to integrate students into the new environment, whether in person or virtually.

Belonging

The desire to belong is inherently human and, therefore, a critical component of college student success (Strayhorn, 2018). Students want to be valued and respected members of the college (Strayhorn, 2018) and hope to feel fully supported by campus services (Strayhorn, 2018). Isolation, othering, and the "pulls and tugs" of home can lessen a student's sense of belonging over time (Strayhorn, 2018) and will likely have an impact on persistence. With this in mind, college onboarding activities should be explicit about naming the institution's belief in individual student success and introduce students to the services designed to support that success.

Transition

Schlossberg (1981) defined transition as an event or nonevent that can result in a change regarding roles, relationships, or a routine. Transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995) focuses on the conditions that shape responses to change and include situation, self, support, and strategies, also known as the 4 S's. Situation is what or who caused the transition and considers whether the person experiencing it has control or not. Self refers to the person in transition and may incorporate the person's age, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation, among other characteristics. For example, a first-generation college student may experience a college transition differently than a non-first-generation college student due to that aspect of self. Support refers to communities and networks, like friends, families, or peer groups of which the person in transition is a part. Strategies may include skills developed or learned by the individual to assist in transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Furthermore, transition theory provides a foundation for examining and supporting college students' integration into the college community.

New Student Orientation

Context for the Evolution of Orientation

The orientation program (OP) at CU Denver differs from other institutions as it runs April – August due to the nature of rolling admissions. To provide students with access to the courses they need, the OP season starts in late spring and continues through Prep Week (the week before the start of the semester).

Over the years, as NSO has evolved and grown and experienced unit reorganizations, the NSO team started to see first-year students and families grow fatigued and disengaged by mid-day of the one-day, 8-hour orientation program. There was too much academic information, resources, and engagement crammed into the event. Academic advising occurred in a one-hour group setting where advising groups would range from 5 to 50 students depending on the number of students registered for each session. NSO expected students to leave with a course schedule and knowledge of campus resources, billing structures, financial aid next steps. Students were also supposed to feel a sense of belonging.

In early 2019, NSO participated in a Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) Review, which included NSO staff and stakeholders from across campus. The group reviewed NSO processes and options. NSO also administered campus partner surveys and conducted first-year focus groups. The NSO team found that students were not retaining information from their orientation program. In a few cases, students were not even sure whether they met with an academic advisor. By the start of the semester, students did not know which resources they should look for or where they were located.

Additionally, Transfer Initiatives and NSO began discussing post-admission transfer student support in 2019, with a specific focus on mandatory orientation and advising. Pre-2019, transfer students were offered a half-day orientation with only four available sessions throughout the summer. Participation was not mandatory. CU Denver's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences was the only college requiring mandatory advising for transfer students before first-semester registration. In summer 2019, NSO piloted CU Denver's first mandatory transfer to all incoming summer and fall transfer students. The approach was delivered via three avenues broken down by school or college: (a) fully online advising appointment, (b) half-day advising program, or (c) full-day program with morning presentations by campus departments, a campus tour, and afternoon group advising with the students' intended school or college. Student and campus feedback from these NSO offerings inspired and informed a new approach to transfer student orientation and advising in alignment with the general first-year offerings.

The 2020 orientation program was a two-day student experience hosted on first-year- and transfer-specific days. The first day, Advising Day, was designed to support academic integration (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975), connecting students to their academic advisors and walking them through registration for their first semester courses. The second day, Student Success Day, introduced students to their peers, orientation leaders (OLs), a faculty lecture, and resources designed to assist in their academic and social integration (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975). Participation in Student Success Days was optional for transfer students as they were also given online modules to complement their advising day experience.

The two-day program created the following opportunities:

- **Intentional academic integration**. The focus of Advising Day is to introduce students to their advisor and school or college and navigate registration. Students need to be introduced to structural dimensions, the standards of the institution, and normative dimensions (Tinto, 1975).
- **Intentional social integration.** The Student Success Day was designed for students to connect with one

another and to focus on the resources and opportunities students should engage with during their first semester. Students want to see what their experience could look like at their institution. The more they see that and experience social integration, the greater the chances of institutional commitment (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975).

- **Gap programming (Supplemental Spotlight Sessions).** The two-day program was not offered consecutively. The second day, Student Success, was offered closer to the start of the semester. These additional information sessions allowed students, their parents, and other support persons, the opportunity to stay engaged from April through August.

- **OL development.** Orientation leaders had a prominent role in assisting students with registration, leading Just Ask Me or JAM sessions.

The two-day program was originally designed to be an on-campus experience in which students would become familiar with academic and student success resources. Due to the unforeseen circumstances of COVID-19, the orientation program had to be reimagined as a live, online format using the Zoom video conference platform. The first transfer orientation was offered on March 25, 2020, (9 days after the entire university moved to remote learning). The orientation team had less than two weeks to create an online structure to offer Advising Days. In preparation for the online format, NSO held practice sessions for the STFE team and campus partners, which was a guiding force in transforming to an online program.

Advising Day – NSO Day 1

Logistics. To provide students with an exceptional online Advising Day experience, STFE provided separate transfer and first-year Advising Days. Staff managed four Zoom rooms, which corresponded to school and college advising units. During the original planning phase, NSO envisioned having eight concurrent Zoom rooms, one for each advising unit, but that proved to be a logistical challenge for staffing and university resources. Students were assigned to one of the four Zoom groups according to their declared major. OLs and peer advocate leaders (PALs) assisted with course registration in smaller breakout rooms to give new students more individualized support. NSO hosted 25 Advising Day sessions.

The link to access the session was emailed to students 24 hours and 1 hour before the start of Advising Day and Student Success sessions. If a student was a no show, was lost logging in, or disappeared from the Zoom meeting, an NSO staff member would call the student to check on them and inquire about any issues they may be experiencing. Staff from the Office of the Registrar, Admissions, and department course schedulers assisted with any enrollment barriers students encountered.

In addition to Zoom, the STFE team stayed in communication by using the Microsoft Teams chat function. OLs also had a Teams chat to support them.

Advising Day agenda

- Check-in
- Welcome
- First-Year/Transfer Experience Video
- Advising Video (school/college introduction)
- Advising & Registration Sessions

Learning outcomes. The NSO staff created learning outcomes for Advising Day sessions based on CAS standards and the 2019 CAS Review. These learning outcomes correlate to the CAS domain of knowledge acquisition, integration, construction, and application (CAS, n.d.).

Students will:

1. Meet one-to-one with an academic advisor and know

      a. how to follow up with the advisor,

      b. what a credit hour is,

      c. what a degree audit is, and

      d. how to find degree requirements;

2. Enroll in courses and understand their weekly academic schedule for the first semester;

3. Understand where to find financial resources;

4. Make a personal connection with at least one person (e.g., academic advisor, OL, department representative); and

5. Understand the physical layout of the campus.

Advising students virtually. At CU Denver, the advising structure is decentralized across seven schools and colleges and the Center for Undergraduate Exploration and Advising, which advises undeclared students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and students with fewer than 30 credit hours in the College of Arts and Media. Intending to ensure consistent advising processes, the academic deans from each school and college supported the decision to adopt one-to-one advising at orientation. Whenever possible, that meeting, which was held via a Zoom breakout room, was with a student's assigned academic advisor—the individual with whom the student would interact for the remainder of their first year.

Though not an expectation set forth by the orientation team, many advisors reached out to their students via email before Advising Day, welcoming them to CU Denver and providing them with advising materials and, if the major was known, an academic degree map with a sample schedule. During the advising sessions, advisors could refer to this email and use the Zoom screen sharing function to walk students through the various attachments. This approach allowed for a highly personalized experience. The advisors were also able to annotate the degree map as needed and/or use the Zoom whiteboard to take notes. Students could take a screenshot and/or a photograph of the screen for future reference. Advisors made a note of the one-on-one meeting in EAB Navigate, CU Denver's student retention platform.

The primary goal of the individual advising session was to assist the student in developing a fall academic plan with specific course selections. After meeting with an advisor, students left the breakout room and returned to the primary school, college, or advising unit's room to register for classes with the assistance of OLs and professional STFE staff. In many cases, when advisors finished their one-to-one meetings, they returned to the main room to offer additional support and troubleshoot when necessary.

Impact of Remote Advising. Offering remote advising days allowed both students and advisors to gain awareness of and comfort with a virtual advising session. Moving forward, students could anticipate who they would meet with during future sessions, how they would reach them, and what that session might look and feel like in an online format. While advising looked different, the implementation of support and strategies to assist students in their transition to CU Denver was even more personal and hands on. Advisors learned through the orientation experience that virtual advising allows for in-the-moment troubleshooting. For example, the Zoom screen sharing function enabled advisors to help students navigate the course search process and catch any mistakes (e.g., a student typed in an incorrect course prefix or selected the wrong enrollment term) or enrollment barriers. Advising at NSO can be quite prescriptive, with a heavy focus on course selection and enrollment. Still, the new format allowed advisors to adopt a more holistic approach with each student.

Student Success Day – NSO Day 2

The purpose and structure of Student Success Days permitted larger student cohorts. As such, NSO hosted only 14 Success Day sessions. The goal of these sessions centered on social integration (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975) and belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). NSO approached this by providing a platform for peer-to-peer

interactions, space for students to connect with faculty and experience a college-level lecture, and multiple opportunities to have their questions answered. Participation in this program was optional for transfer students.

Logistics. Similar to Advising Day, NSO used the Zoom video conferencing platform to offer Student Success sessions. However, instead of hosting four separate Zoom sessions, there was one session for all students. During the check-in and welcome, NSO staff assigned students to breakout rooms where OLs led Just Ask Me (JAM) sessions. There were two JAM sessions during each program: the first session focused on icebreakers and peer-to-peer interactions. In contrast, the second focused on the resources with which students should be familiar, who they should be in contact with questions, and an opportunity to learn about the life of a Lynx from current students. NSO staff also used Microsoft Teams during Student Success Days to communicate.

Student Success Day agenda

- Check-in
- Leadership Welcome
- Session Overview
- Just Ask Me (JAM) Session
- Mock Classroom
- Just Ask Me (JAM) Session

Learning outcomes. NSO staff created the following learning outcomes for Student Success Day sessions based on CAS standards and their 2019 CAS Review. The learning outcomes correlate with the CAS domains of knowledge acquisition, interpersonal competency, intrapersonal development, humanitarianism and civic engagement, cognitive complexity, and practical competence (CAS, n.d.).

As a result of participating in Student Success Day, students will:

1. Be able to identify at least three campus resources;
2. Be introduced to concepts surrounding culture, identity, ethics, and integrity;
3. Be introduced to career competencies;
4. Be introduced to and engage with You@CUDenver (wellness portal);
5. Be introduced to and understand the importance of social/peer connections; and
6. Engage in activities that challenge them to think critically, collaborate effectively, and see themselves as leaders.

Supplemental Sessions

Supplemental Spotlight Sessions were offered as a result of having to restructure the OP agendas for delivery in an online setting. Specifically, the daylong event needed to be restructured to a 2–3-hour program to be respectful of new students and their families and the challenges of remote participation. Spotlight Sessions were offered to fill in information gaps. NSO asked, "How can we better prepare our students for the college transition in a virtual setting?" and "How do we maximize our outreach to showcase the support resources available to students?" The support component focused on the offices, resources, and people who assist students in their transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995) and included Financial Aid and Scholarships, Veteran and Military Student Services, Degree Audit, First-Year Experiences, Housing, Dining, Wellness Center, and Student Life

Challenges

Some of the challenges NSO experienced with the new two-day OP and transitioning to a virtual format include:

- **Student communication.** In March, the NSO team thought they would only need to be remote for one month. Initial communications to students stated that only April and May OPs would be offered virtually. Despite the initial hopeful outlook, campus sessions had to be canceled, and NSO had to let

folks know that all OPs would be online.

- *Zoom links.* It was a logistical challenge to ensure students received the correct Zoom link for their Advising Day sessions. A student may have received an incorrect Zoom link for several reasons. For example, students may have changed their major but did not reschedule their Advising Day. As such, the NSO reservation system may not have recognized their need for a different link. Alternately, a student may not have checked the email address to which NSO was sending information.

- *Accessing Zoom via cell phone.* Though the session was fully accessible via cell phone, some students experienced difficulties with course registration. The registration system is accessible via cell phone but posed some logistical issues for the student to be able to be on Zoom and in the student portal at the same time. Students had a better experience if they were able to attend NSO using a desktop computer or laptop.

- *Staying engaged.* It was sometimes challenging to get students to use the video function of Zoom during the OP. Some reasons students may not have shared video include no webcam, fear of other orientation participants seeing their background/surroundings, poor Wi-Fi connection, and general feelings of being overwhelmed with the process.

- *Staff burnout.* By the end of the summer, staff were exhausted and burned out. Navigating the new program in a fast-paced, remote setting was not something for which they had prepared mentally, physically, or emotionally.

Lessons Learned

Though the pandemic presented some challenges to programming, it also allowed for reframing previous thinking about orientation programs.

- *Keeping virtual options.* During the pandemic, NSO opened up the Advising Day options to international students, who previously went through a separate onboarding process in which they had to navigate advising and registration independently. Virtual advising was also a cost-effective benefit for the out-of-state population to be able to participate in orientation.

- *Advising Day lag time.* During the Advising Day program, some of the students would have a lag time between completing the Advising Day modules and their one-to-one advising session. The modules are housed in Canvas (the campus learning management system) and instruct students on completing the registration process and obtaining a photo ID, in addition to offering other information students need before the start of the semester. As a result of this lag, NSO implemented a tiered agenda in which students would have pit stops during the session to meet their needs.

- *Financial aid accessibility.* Because the Financial Aid Office could not be at all Advising Days and Spotlight Sessions, students found it difficult to navigate the financial aid process. Moving forward, the Financial Aid Office will provide a pre-recorded information session and virtual front desk hours immediately following NSO programming, which will only be accessible for NSO participants.

First-Year Experiences

Lynx Summer Academy

Lynx Summer Academy (LSA) is CU Denver's summer bridge program for incoming first-generation students. During this eight-week summer program, which runs from June through the beginning of August, students enroll in one three-credit hour course that will fulfill a university core requirement area (e.g., mathematics, behavioral sciences, social sciences) and a one-credit hour UNIV 1110: College Success course, which counts as an elective. Two to three cohorts run simultaneously, with each cohort enrolling 20 students.

Two faculty members, one program graduate assistant, and a PAL support each cohort. The four credit hours earned through completion of the program come at no cost to the students. This program allows first-generation students to connect to one another, their campus, academic resources, and student support resources, all of which assist in them in developing a sense of belonging, which can ultimately impact their success (Strayhorn, 2018).

Transition to remote. In late spring 2020, CU Denver announced that all courses for the summer semester would be taught remotely. At this point, the FYE team notified the LSA participants of the change and verified whether students were still interested in participating in a fully remote-synchronous summer academy. Since this transition to remote meant that classroom space was no longer a concern, the FYE team partnered with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions to offer up to 60 spots in the LSA program.

Due to the increase in capacity, the program grew to 54 confirmed participants for summer 2020, up from 16 in the 2019 LSA cohort. This increase in students also meant an increase in support for remote programming since students would be limited to involvement outside of class due to CU Denver's restrictions and the greater Colorado state-level restrictions on gatherings and open businesses. In response, FYE created a menu of remote events with campus partners, including but not limited to the Career Center, the Learning Resources Center, and Student Life.

In addition to creating remote programming, the FYE team led a variety of training sessions for LSA faculty to assist with converting in-class lessons to remote-friendly formats. These sessions included workshops on technology, such as Google Jamboard and Flipgrid, and information on designing and building student-friendly Canvas courses. The FYE associate director also created detailed week-by-week lesson plans with a variety of exercises and activities that could be facilitated remotely.

Due to the sudden shift from in-person to remote, the FYE associate director and New Student Orientation team worked together with the PAL coordinator to use student staff in recording a variety of how-to videos for students. These videos covered a variety of frequently used campus technology platforms (e.g., getting acquainted with Zoom, highlighting multiple features in Canvas, and providing a step-by-step, or rather screen-by-screen, overview on how to set up and check your CU Denver student email).

PALs were present in each remote course for the entirety of the summer program. This additional student staff support allowed the instructor to effectively teach and lead classes through a variety of activities and lectures while the PAL monitored class attendance and the live chat and helped troubleshoot technology issues for students. Due to the remote nature of LSA for summer 2020, and because LSA students were recruited heavily from the Denver-Metro area, all students remained in their homes for the duration of the summer bridge program.

At the conclusion of the LSA program, data on both GPA and retention to fall 2020 were collected. Out of the 54 students enrolled in LSA, 53 students enrolled at least part-time in fall 2020; this is a 98% yield rate. The overall average GPA for LSA students across all three cohorts was 3.72.

Post-LSA, various students held positions of student leadership at CU Denver, including securing on-campus student jobs and taking on roles within the Undergraduate Research office on campus. The LSA graduate assistant also continued to check in with the LSA 2020 cohort quarterly throughout the fall 2020 semester. This check-in allowed the relationships built over the summer between the LSA cohort students and their faculty to be maintained, increasing the support available to the LSA cohort as they navigated a fully remote fall semester.

Challenges. There were a variety of challenges presented to the LSA program, including:
- communication to faculty and students on the course modality shift with only two months until the start of the program,

- overhaul of activities and lesson plans for UNIV 1110 due to COVID-19 restrictions on events and large gatherings at CU Denver, and
- the toll of shifting to fully remote work and operations on staff.

These challenges were met by increasing outreach to students enrolled in the LSA program. FYE offered supplemental sessions for the students and their families to ask questions, a special orientation session for LSA participants that allowed them to register for fall 2020 courses early, and increased phone and email contact. Activities and programming offered via Zoom also increased. FYE instructors and student staff hosted workshops from campus partners, virtual tours of Denver landmarks such as the art museum, and virtual community-building programs such as movie nights. FYE also provided new training workshops and partnerships for faculty and instructors teaching remote-synchronous classes. These workshops featured speakers from new partners in the Office of Digital Education, who shared tips and software platforms with the faculty and instructors. In addition, the Director of Digital Education offered a Canvas overview service, where she would review the faculty and instructors' Canvas course builds and provide feedback on the structure and flow.

First-Year Experience Program

Early in the summer semester, CU Denver announced that most courses would run in a remote-synchronous format in fall 2020. This directly affected approximately 640 students within the First-Year Experience (FYE) program. The FYE team immediately began outreach to FYE faculty to share two course format options: hybrid or remote-synchronous. The course formats were defined in the following ways by CU Denver:

- **Hybrid course:** A hybrid course would operate with a 50% classroom capacity each week. Half of the students enrolled in the course would meet in person for one week, with the rest of the class meeting virtually via Zoom. The two cohorts would switch the next week.
- **Remote-synchronous course**: The remote-synchronous course would operate virtually with all enrolled students in that course meeting at the designated time for their course each week via Zoom.

A third option was fully online and was defined as the most flexible option for students because there were no live components where students would interact with their instructor or classmates. Everything was hosted asynchronously in Canvas. The FYE team decided not to use this format in the program because those real-time, in-class discussions and experiences with instructors and peers are very important in helping new students, especially first-generation students, build community at their institution. Of the 21 first-year seminars and 15 UNIV 1110: College Success courses, only five faculty originally opted to teach in a hybrid format. By the end of the semester, only two courses remained in a hybrid format, with the rest of the courses moving fully remote.

Following the announcement, the FYE team began setting up remote training opportunities for faculty and staff teaching within the FYE program in fall 2020. The training covered a wide range of topics such as understanding new student conduct procedures around Zoom-bombing, recording lectures, and setting up Canvas modules in a student-friendly format. Guest speakers were brought in from the Office of Digital Education to provide additional tools, templates, and software for faculty and staff to use. The Office of Digital Education also offered opportunities for faculty to receive feedback on their course structure and module set-up before students enrolled.

While faculty and staff training was ongoing, the FYE team was also in attendance at every NSO Advising Day session to deliver a presentation on the FYE course offerings, answer questions about the courses and course formats, and assist with enrollment. FYE also offered Spotlight Sessions in partnership with other offices on campus for students and family members who wanted more information or had questions about the fall term.

With all program and outreach efforts being remote, social media use became an integral advertising medium for FYE. The FYE team used their own Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook accounts to promote the

courses and Spotlight Sessions throughout the spring and summer semesters, as well as the official CU Denver social media accounts. This led to collaborations on various Facebook and Instagram Live events, course promotions, and video recordings linking students to other resources at CU Denver. Faculty in the FYE program also played a huge role in this by recording videos of themselves discussing which courses they would be teaching in the fall and providing a summary of what students could expect if they took the course.

FYE created week-by-week lesson plans for all UNIV 1110: College Success courses that outlined each lesson's breakdown and offered both a hybrid version and a remote version, depending on which format the instructor had chosen. Since first-year seminar courses also included at least five UNIV 1110 lesson topics, these lesson plans were then shared with first-year seminar faculty to be incorporated into their course materials.

The FYE team spent the summer improving two Canvas course shells that stored various resources for UNIV 1110 instructors and first-year seminar faculty. These resources included Office of Digital Education training, Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) micro-credential training on creating rubrics to reflect transparent grading practices, "How-To" videos for students, and more. These Canvas shells were updated with ongoing virtual events for students, faculty, and staff at CU Denver throughout the fall 2020 semester.

FYE and the PAL program created a First Six Weeks remote programming series for all FYE students to create opportunities for connection among FYE students, PALs, and faculty. After the first six weeks, the FYE and PAL team continued to host bi-monthly Wake Up Wednesday events. These sessions featured various FYE faculty, staff, and partner offices across campus and provided a space for students to chat with their faculty or PALs, learn more about other resources on campus, and ask for assistance if they needed additional support.

Although the overall enrollment in FYE courses was lower in fall 2020 than in previous years, the overall enrollment of incoming first-year students in at least one FYE course was 51% for fall 2020 compared to 47% in fall 2019. The overall grade point average (GPA) breakdown post-fall 2020 was also significantly higher for students at CU Denver who took at least one FYE course compared to students who did not take an FYE course. Figure 1 illustrates the breakdown of those grade point averages.

Figure 1.

FYE GPA Comparisons (end of term fall 2020)
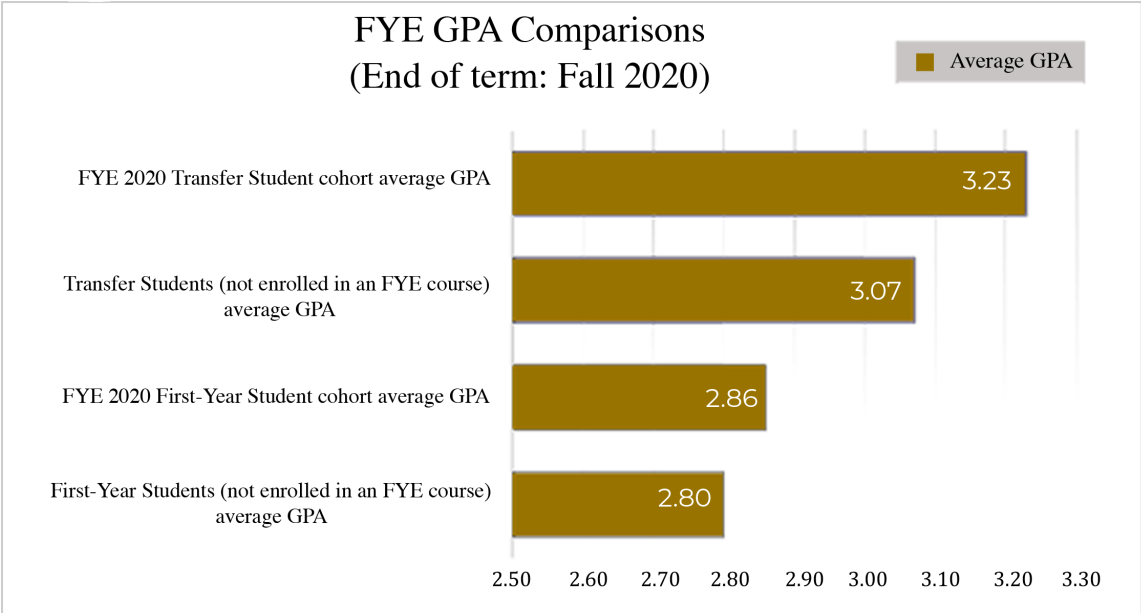
Note: Information obtained from student course records at the University of Colorado Denver.

Challenges. The challenges for the FYE program in fall 2020 were similar to those faced by the LSA program but on a larger scale. Additional challenges presented to the FYE program included:

- advertising the FYE program and course options to incoming students through limited online options (e.g., Zoom, social media, and email) while keeping in mind the Zoom fatigue entering students and their families were experiencing and
- training FYE faculty on technology platforms and Canvas course build options for their remote-synchronous and hybrid courses.

FYE staff met these challenges by creating high touchpoints via multiple platforms and increasing training for faculty and instructors. The FYE program worked with NSO to have presenters in each Zoom breakout room during orientation who would talk about FYE, the course options, and answer student questions. When FYE staff could not be present in all four breakout rooms, NSO staff played a pre-recorded video. FYE also hosted supplemental sessions throughout the summer to provide more information on the courses to interested students, their parents, and guests. As mentioned previously, FYE also hosted various social media live sessions on the official CU Denver Instagram and Facebook accounts to continue to reach admitted students and their families. The FYE associate director created additional training sessions throughout the summer for FYE faculty and instructors. These training sessions included information about setting up a remote-synchronous course in Zoom and creating student-friendly Canvas courses, workshops with the Title IX and Student Conduct office on policies surrounding Zoom classrooms, and more.

Lessons Learned

Many lessons were learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift from in-person courses and events to remote-synchronous and hybrid courses and events. The following lessons were gleaned from both LSA and FYE:

- ***It starts with confident instructors.*** Offering additional training workshops for instructors on Canvas course building and additional technology and software platforms allowed instructors to feel confident in adapting their courses to be remote-synchronous or hybrid. The instructors were able to develop new ways of engaging their students in their coursework and activities, from breakout rooms in Zoom to Google Jamboards and more.
- ***Zoom fatigue is real.*** Balancing lectures and class activities was essential to keep students engaged in the Zoom classroom. Breaks need to be added during the longer LSA summer course sessions to keep students engaged and give their eyes a break from staring at their screens.
- ***Unique activities and events can be done remotely.*** It was possible to create engaging experiences for students in online settings. Some of the programs included a virtual tour of famous landmarks across the world as a part of a class, virtual trivia events, and movie nights.
- ***Connect with students outside class.*** Setting up check-in points with students was crucial during the fall 2020 semester. In FYE, students met one-to-one with their faculty member and their PAL as a course requirement. These check-ins allowed the faculty and student staff to gauge challenges students were facing and connect them to other resources and staff members at CU Denver. Check-ins and referrals prevented students from getting lost in the virtual space during their fall semester. The LSA program graduate assistant also created check-ins throughout the fall semester with the LSA 2020 cohort to visit with them and help them with any issues they were running into.
- ***Virtual programming can lead to wider access.*** The remote-synchronous courses allowed for more flexibility for students. For example, many out-of-state students who opted to stay in their home state for the semester were still able to participate in their courses. In the past, they would not have been able to find a remote FYE course. This has led to future conversations around permanent remote-

synchronous courses for the FYE and LSA program to continue engaging with out-of-state and fully online students at CU Denver.

- ***Preparation is crucial.*** The creation of the week-by-week lesson plans for UNIV 1110 and FYS faculty helped support them by providing a basic framework for each FYE lesson while still allowing for activities and presentations to be adapted as the faculty and instructors saw fit for their classes. The lesson plans also included activity options for both hybrid and remote-synchronous courses to support new first-time instructors and faculty as they worked to find their unique teaching style for their course.

Looking forward to the fall 2021 semester, CU Denver faces many unknowns. Application and admission tracking data were not robust enough at the time of submission to predict the numbers of new and continuing students. In addition, the university is continuing to watch and be involved in the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in the state of Colorado. This uncertainty means the course formats for fall 2021 are still largely undetermined.

Despite the uncertainty, the FYE team continues to move forward and plans to offer in-person, hybrid, and remote-synchronous course formats for fall 2021. With faculty reporting more confidence in digital education, the FYE program may consider expanding course offerings from fully remote condensed UNIV 1110 courses that can be completed in the week before the regular fall semester to fully remote first-year seminar courses. The flexibility offered by remote learning can create a variety of new opportunities for the student body at CU Denver, including a free credit version of UNIV 1110 available to out-of-state students prior to arriving at CU Denver and diverse course formats that would appeal to a wide variety of learners. The FYE team continues to evaluate the performance of the fall 2020 semester and continues to look towards innovations and program upgrades for fall 2021.

Conclusion

Through collaboration, innovative thinking, and implementation, the Student Transitions and Family Engagement team provided a robust set of opportunities for new first-year and transfer students. From orientation to advising, to summer bridge, to FYE courses, the conversion to virtual spaces was intentionally designed. Through frameworks of academic and social integration (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975), belonging (Strayhorn, 2018), and transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995), the STFE team supported students throughout their transition and integration into CU Denver.

Like many other long-standing industries, higher education and student affairs are often hesitant and sometimes even resistant to change. Change can be scary, and the idea of changing an institution's mindset and culture around traditional programs and procedures is a daunting undertaking. However, when we reflect on the radical shifts we made on an incredibly truncated timeline during 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not hard to imagine the transformational impacts programs and institutions can have on students when we thoughtfully challenge the way we have always done things.

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