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Setting the Tone: Orientation Plays Big Role in Students' Success

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For new University of Pittsburgh students, the first few weeks on campus may shape the course of their collegiate careers.

That may seem like a dramatic statement, but several research studies have found that student academic success, including whether students choose to remain at a university, is linked significantly to the first days and weeks in their new environment.

Actively aware of that important connection, Pitt develops an extensive slate of orientation activities for new students each year. The 2016 New and Transfer Student Orientation Week features 98 events and programs and runs from Aug. 22 through Aug. 28, the day before classes begin. International students coming to Pitt for the first time were welcomed with additional programming that began Aug. 17.

"Orientation is key to our students' successful transition to Pitt," said Kenyon Bonner, vice provost and dean of students. "Our programming is designed to integrate students into the social and academic culture of our campus. Through orientation, we aim to help students forge connections, learn about Pitt traditions, and identify resources that will ultimately support their success here."



Chancellor Patrick Gallagher with members of Pitt's Student Alumni Association during a previous year's Orientation Week.

The week offers activities ranging from campus tours, tips on managing finances, and information sessions on study-abroad options, to ice cream socials, hypnotist performances, and movie nights. Programming for the annual week of introduction to Pitt is led by the University's Office of First Year Experience within the Division of Student Affairs. "We try to educate students on what to expect," said Melissa Warthen, associate director of student life, who oversees the Office of First Year Experience and New Student Programs. "That means everything from rules and expectations to cheers and fight songs. Orientation Week is our opportunity to do that."

The initial days of college can be a crucial time not only for students but also for their parents and families, a fact reflected in Orientation Week's programming schedule.

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Follow a group of Pitt students on the Returning to the Roots of Civil Rights bus tour, a nine-day, 2,300-mile journey crisscrossing five states.

Offerings like "College Parenting 101" and "First-Generation College Students and Their Families" aim to make parents feel good about this time of transition.

"The student doesn't go through the college transition independently," Warthen said. "Families are going through their own transitions. They need reassurance that their children have everything they need, and that Pitt is a safe environment."

Orientation Week can also be critical in helping students identify healthy and safe practices. Fitness classes and programs addressing healthy eating habits are sprinkled throughout the schedule. One required program, "The Tipping Point," addresses alcohol, sexual assault, campus safety, and mental health resources.

"There's an idea out there of what college will be," said Warthen, "but we want incoming students to see that there are fun, healthy alternatives to certain choices."

That's why programming sometimes runs late into the evening, with events like the "Panther Quest" scavenger hunt styled after the *Amazing Race* reality TV show, a midnight breakfast, and 10 p.m. yoga session, complete with black lights and glow sticks.

"We don't want anyone to be able to say they had nothing to do at 10 p.m.," Warthen said.

Student response to Pitt's efforts has been overwhelmingly positive. Ninety-four percent of 2015 freshmen survey respondents agreed that orientation helped them learn about campus resources, and 91 percent agreed that the programming made them feel connected to Pitt.

Some highlights of this year's program:

- One very successful component of the 2015 orientation will be repeated this year: a presentation on diversity and inclusion by Jamie Washington, president and founder of the Washington Consulting Group, based in Baltimore, Md. Washington will present "Building a Pitt Community," which focuses on living and studying in a community of diverse backgrounds and perspectives, at 10:30 a.m. Aug. 25, at the Petersen Events Center. It is a fitting way to kick off the 2016–2017 academic year, which has been named the Year of Diversity. All faculty, staff, returning students, and other members of the campus community are invited to attend Washington's presentation.
- New Student Convocation, a longstanding Pitt tradition held at the Petersen Events Center, is set for 3 p.m. Aug. 24. Chancellor Patrick Gallagher and other distinguished members of the Pitt community will formally welcome the 4,000 first-year students (Class of 2020) as well as about 900 transfer students.
- The Class of 2020 will also get its turn at having a class photo taken on New Student Convocation day, which is an annual tradition. Recent years have seen new students competing to break somewhat obscure—but fun—records contained in the book *Guinness World Records*. In 2013, for example, 3,617 members of the Class of 2017 gathered on the Petersen Events Center lawn and formed an image of Pitt's panther mascot, securing the Guinness world record for the Largest Human Animal Image.

This year's class photo will take a different twist, with the students executing a card stunt. After Convocation, new students will return to the Petersen Events Center later that evening for the photo. Small pieces of cardboard will be affixed on every seat in the Pete and, at the appointed time, students will turn over their cards, revealing a single, massive image. The activity is designed to build class unity and a sense of connectedness.

Introduction

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"We hope they'll keep their square of cardboard," said Warthen, "as a reminder that they're a part of something much bigger."

(Page 1 photo: Christopher R. Ledix helps lead the charge of nearly 4,000 students up Desoto Street to the Petersen Events Center for New Student Convocation in 2015. Now a Pitt sophomore, Ledix is from Burlington, N.J.)



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