

Capturing the Moment: Using Digital Imagery to Welcome First-Year Students

Linda N. Roney, Associate Professor of Nursing and Health Studies, *Fairfield University*

Iris Johnson, BSN, *Fairfield University*

Mark Ligas, Associate Professor of Marketing and Vice Provost, *Fairfield University*

The college onboarding experience provides an important opportunity for new students to lay the groundwork for relationship development among peers and with the school; however, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Class of 2024 was forced into a virtual environment. How could students get to know one another and gain a sense of connection to the university community? This article discusses a novel strategy undertaken by a mid-size private institution in the northeastern United States. Students used digital imagery and reflection to express themselves to one another and to the school. The lessons learned from this highly experiential process provide insights into how students can connect, even virtually, with the campus community.

Amid the significant social and academic changes that happen during a student's college transition, friends play a supportive role in achieving the critical developmental tasks of this new life period (Rogers et al., 2018). While there are many opportunities for friendships to develop, bonds are often initiated via the new student onboarding process. Creative orientation programs have gained popularity due to their strong outcomes, including fostering social connection, social activity, and emotional reactivity (Davidson & Ewert, 2020). Many topics are covered in these experiences that influence students' feelings for and perceptions of the institution, thus impacting the likelihood of academic success. For instance, students who believe the school is interested in their well-being may experience higher levels of perceived health and wellness and increased commitment to persistence even in times of stress (Daniels et al., 2020).

Loneliness, identity distress, and the tendency to make social comparisons are all common adverse reactions among those transitioning to college (Yang et al., 2019). In particular, first-year students grapple with preserving pre-college relationships while investing effort into new ones, just as they are experiencing newfound independence (Yang et al., 2019). Further, this adjustment varies for each student (Kasky Hernández & Khan, 2020). As a result, personal and university-based supports are essential for students in order for them to develop positive coping strategies in the face of unanticipated challenges (Rogers et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the negative effects of transitioning to college, as evidenced by the increase in student anxiety and depression, along with feeling lonely and isolated (McAlpine, 2021). The need for institutional support during this important transition is even more critical given these various mental health challenges.

First-year students typically transition into college through an intentionally designed in-person onboarding experience. Orientations are essential for introducing students to campus and helping them form relationships with new peers. Unfortunately, the pandemic required many institutions to rework this critical transition experience into a virtual offering. The team at Fairfield University chose to focus on the importance of creating a virtual environment that promoted human connection, self-expression, and support. To facilitate positive mental health and transition experiences, the institution constructed an activity that not only enabled students to express themselves but also signaled the institution's sincere commitment to supporting their well-being (Daniels et al., 2020). Students used imagery and reflection to share experiences of inspiration, growth, and empowerment and to promote feelings of pride for and connection with their new campus community.

Description of the Innovative Activity

Each year, accepted members of the incoming class participate in a summer webinar to help introduce them to each other and to the university community. Each incoming class has a theme. For the Class of 2024, the theme “Determined Together” reflected the perseverance and resilience of students completing high school and making the transition to college during a global pandemic. Students participate in a required common activity (typically completing assigned readings pertaining to the theme). For the Class of 2024, students received the following reflection prompts:

- Think about times in your life when you have been determined. What did that look like? What did it feel like for you?

- What does determination mean to you right now? What things in your future will require you to be determined?
- Social distancing and sheltering at home are things that might have made us feel like we were alone or not part of something bigger.
- What do the words “determined together” mean to you? Think about the journey that you are about to embark on with classmates you have not met yet.

Each student also received complimentary access to the MyMoments software app (EDI, 2021). The students selected an image (ideally from a camera roll on a phone or other electronic device) that portrayed their determination. Using the MyMoments app, the student then altered the image to visually convey their response to a selected prompt. Common tools in the app include cropping an image, adjusting brightness and vibrancy, applying creative effects, and overlaying text. MyMoments provides tools to construct a highly customized form of digital self-expression; however, it is possible for students to find similar tools via a number of mobile apps, such as Snapchat or VSCO.

The students uploaded their final images to a collaborative, private web space with a written reflection on the prompt. Students placed their images into folders specific to their campus housing assignment, and these folders were then made available so the students could see and “get to know” others living in their residence halls via the posted images. Folders were also available for commuter students and those who were opting for remote learning during the pandemic.

Imagery for eliciting and representing objective thoughts and feelings can be quite powerful. As most information processing is visual, pictures serve as an excellent stimulus for unlocking “hidden” or difficult-to-decipher knowledge (Zaltman, 1997). The resulting folders of MyMoments images with accompanying reflections laid the groundwork for constructing virtual communities that helped students to get to know one another before the start of the academic year. Examples are provided in Figures 1 and 2. Activities using the student-created images were implemented in the weekly First-Year Experience (FYE) seminar throughout the fall semester. In addition, the photos were presented during the First-Year Academic Gathering, which serves as the official academic welcome for the incoming class (just as the commencement exercises symbolize the farewell to the graduates).

Conclusion

Creating a sense of community among the newest members of an institution of higher learning is always a priority. The transition to college is a pivotal time for

students, and it is essential that the institution be welcoming, supportive, and promote connections among its community members. The use of imagery via the MyMoments app, coupled with directed reflection based on those images, provides resources for the institution to create such an environment—in this case, for those incoming first-year students who did not have the opportunity to experience a typical in-person onboarding event. This strategy could be used for any number of situations where community development is key but few opportunities exist to bring individuals together in the same physical space.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the generous support of and partnership with Steven Koppel, Dr. Michael Bennick, and Olivia Spring of the EDI Institute, whose collaboration was key to the design and implementation of this project. As noted in the article, EDI Institute provided all members of the Class of 2024 with free access to its app to help the incoming students reflect on their experiences transitioning from high school to college. EDI's kindness and care for our students will not be forgotten. A special thank you to Olivia Spring, who worked very closely with our team to ensure this project's success during every step. We are incredibly grateful for her time, compassion, and hard work during the very uncertain times of this project during the summer of 2020.

In addition, the authors would like to thank members of the Fairfield University New Student Orientation team, who always provide an outstanding welcome for the new students. Further, we would like to express our gratitude especially to: Meredith Kazer, Fran Levine, Marissa Lischinsky, Katie Magee, Olivia Massaro, Jay Rozgonyi, Maria Showman, Heather Ulrich, Allison Wade, and Debbie Whalley.

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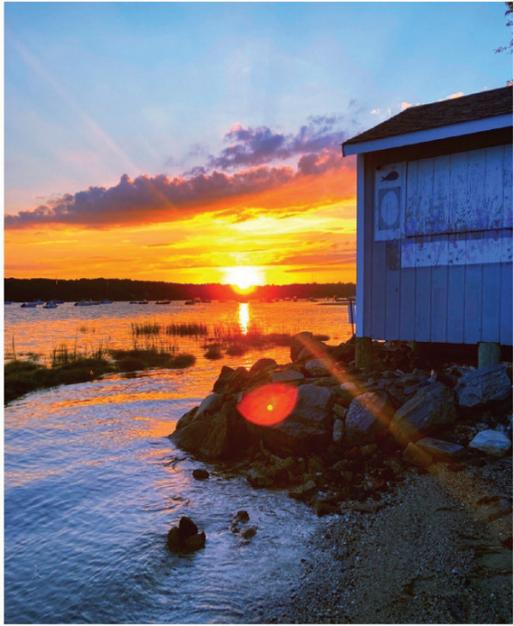
Figure 1
Working out. Sample student submission.



This was a picture taken of me working out at my high school field during quarantine. In the time of uncertainty, I really did not have a lot to hold on to with senior year being taken away from me. Baseball was one thing that I could control and get better at every day. This is what I think determined together means. Going into an uncertain world and doing what makes you passionate. I became very process-oriented during quarantine because I could not see my results and if the hard work was paying off. It really helped me gain clarity and become my best self before leaving for Fairfield.

Figure 2
My happy place. Sample student submission.

This picture is from the sunset at the beach I've been working at this summer. I chose this picture because the beach has brought me so much happiness, and I thought that the sunset perfectly represents how there is still light in these dark times. To me, to be determined together means to be brave and to overcome the challenges in life- big or small, personal or public- in unison and with an abundance of support. At the beach, the members and the workers have created a sense of normalcy that I really appreciate. This is my second year working, and no matter if it is taking care of the beach or if it's just having fun, everyone at the beach does it together, and we are always smiling. Even though this year has been different in many respects, the compassion that everyone shows each other at the beach has been the same. Working here has taught me so many valuable lessons, and I am excited to take this experience with me to Fairfield this fall.



My Happy Place