

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Connecting Honors Students in a Virtual Environment: Activities for Engagement

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With a mix of students returning online and staying at home during COVID-19, the Community College of Beaver County (CCBC) Honors Program in Monaca, PA, had to adapt our model of extracurricular activities to accommodate students who felt comfortable coming on campus as well as balancing virtual events for those who did not. We emphasized creativity with our honors extracurricular offerings to produce a healthy balance of connecting students both online and in person. Below are examples of semester-long activities that we provided to students and how the activities helped to build interpersonal relationships among the honors students. Even though student life has mostly returned to an in-person format, the virtual environment for learning and connecting is not going away, and these

activities will provide a model for building engagement and community on other campuses.

VIRTUAL SUMMER KICK-OFF WITH LIVE UNBOXING

To welcome our incoming class of freshman honors students, we hosted a live unboxing event that was a virtual event where students logged into a virtual meeting and together opened a box of swag that we physically mailed to them. The intention of the virtual event was to welcome the new students to the college community as well as give them information about the honors program. In advance of the virtual event, we mailed each student a box filled with CCBC swag along with their official welcome letter into the program. The box had a note on the outside that asked the students not to open the box until the intended date of the Summer Kick-Off event and provided a link to join the event online. We felt that it was important for the students to receive a box filled with physical items to simulate the real-life experience that they would have had if the event could be hosted on campus. Since unboxing videos were popular on social media, this event was well received by students and shared on their social media platforms. During the live event, students interacted with each other as well as the college President, Provost, Honors Faculty Director, and Director of Student Life and Athletics. The virtual experience for this event allowed students and campus administrators to attend without having to think about travel restrictions, which we feel increased the attendance.

HONORS PROGRAM SUMMER ORIENTATION

We followed up the summer unboxing event with a virtual honors orientation where first-year students had a mini online orientation and then were joined online by our second-year honors students. During the second half of the orientation, we dove deeper into how the academic year would be structured in the uncertain COVID-19 environment. New and returning students officially met each other at this event, which helped them build connections that they would strengthen during the academic year.

AM I HAPPY? MENTAL HEALTH CHECK-IN WORKSHOP

With our student's mental health in mind, we wanted to start the year off strong with a virtual extracurricular activity that would have students check in on their mental health while offering ways for them to improve and boost their overall happiness. In this workshop, we talked about the different types of happiness, our own definitions of happiness, and the components that create happiness. Students participated in several activities including rating their mood on a "mood elevator" and creating their ideal "best month ever." When identifying their "best month ever," they indicated things they are grateful for, things they want to improve on, things that will make them happier, emotions they want to experience, and ways to help others. Students then shared their "best months" with each other. We hoped that starting the academic year with these positive intentions would set students up for success for the remainder of the academic year.

VIRTUAL TRANSFER WORKSHOP: CONNECTING STUDENTS WITH FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

In late fall, we hosted a virtual transfer workshop for our honors students that included tips and factors to consider when picking their next educational institution after they graduate with a two-year associate's degree. We wanted to go beyond the basics of transfer information and offer more of an insider's perspective to really connect the students with some of our local four-year universities. The Director of Student Life and Athletics reached out to admissions counselors at five universities and asked them what they are looking for in transferring students. Questions ranged from student records and transfer scholarship information to more detailed topics that included: "Is having an associate's degree more attractive when transferring?" "Are there any hidden secrets of the application process?" "Are certain parts of the transfer application more important than others?" We also showed students where to look for authentic information on what the student experience is like at other institutions and offered advice on how to prepare for interviews and meetings with transfer counselors.

END-OF-FIRST-SEMESTER VIRTUAL CELEBRATION

Instead of an in-person holiday party, we hosted a virtual celebration where students could take some time to appreciate everything that they accomplished in the COVID-19 environment. Students used this opportunity to socialize and share their experiences on how they got involved in the CCBC campus community in unconventional ways and how their classes went.

NETWORKING 101 WORKSHOP

A question students often ask is how to properly network and make connections, specifically in the online environment. Our goal for this workshop was to give students information that will help them use digital technologies, like social media and email communication, to learn how to build professional relationships to advance their careers. Students learned the subtleties of networking online, how to make a lasting first impression, the power of body language when on virtual calls, and how to address handshakes during COVID-19 and in the post-COVID-19 environment. Students found this workshop useful, especially our tips on how they should be using specific social media platforms to gain the connections they are seeking.

VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

Our honors students are required to participate in a specific number of volunteer activities on campus and in the community. When we made the pivot to online education at the end of the 2020-2021 academic year, we also made a pivot in how we required students to complete their volunteer hours. We offered them several online service opportunities, including the U.N.'s Freerice website-based application, which supports the World Food Programme disaster and conflict relief programs, and Be My Eyes, a free mobile app with a goal to make the world more accessible for blind and low-vision people. When students could return to campus in the fall, we provided several opportunities on campus, including serving as peer tutors in our Academic Support Center and assisting other departments on campus. In the spring, the campus partnered with a local health care provider to administer

COVID-19 vaccines to the community on campus, and this activity enabled students to connect with members of the community.

The CCBC Honors Program strived to put students first through embracing new ways of experiencing extracurricular activities and building interpersonal relationships through technology. We focused on checking in to see how our students were doing both academically and mentally during the pandemic, provided online opportunities for volunteering when in person was not an option, and tailored some of our traditional, in-person programming to include aspects related to digital technologies. All these activities can be replicated and modified at other institutions to engage students in an online setting since the digital learning environment is becoming our new normal. And, as we start to move away from a completely digital environment to incorporating more in-person events, we recognize the importance of always considering how to engage with students who feel more comfortable online by trying to have some way for virtual students to connect with those in person, such as recording and posting important information online or hosting breakout rooms where in-person and online students can connect with each other.

HONORS ONLINE

*Teaching, Learning, and
Building Community Virtually
in Honors Education*

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