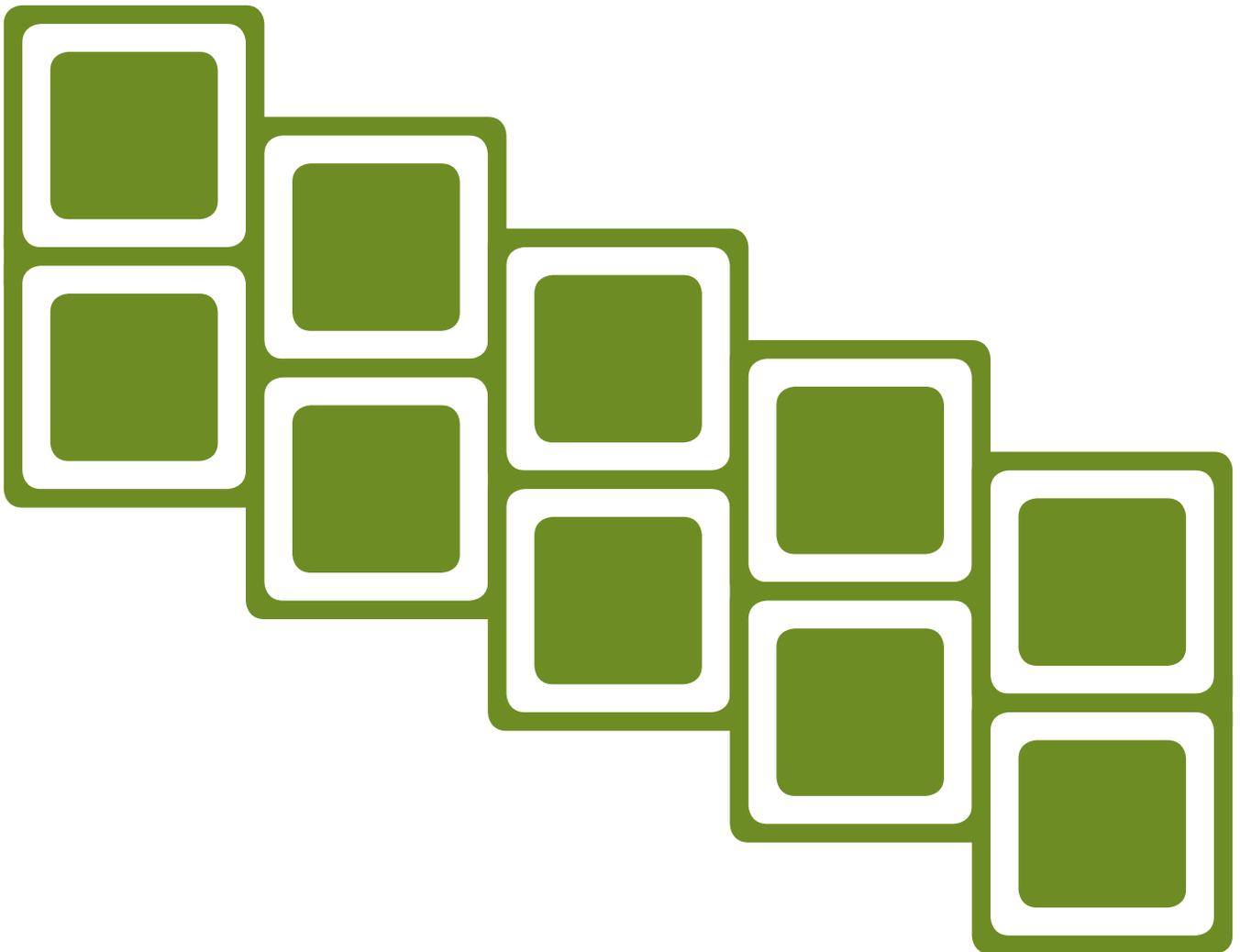


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The Race to the Finish: Constructing a New Summer Program for Incoming Freshmen

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Acknowledgments

I would first and foremost like to thank Susan Schadt, assistant director for marketing and outreach in the University of Connecticut Office of Summer and Winter Programs, for her devotion and tireless energy in support of building the UConn First Summer program. Sue was the magic behind our beautiful branding, but she helped with absolutely everything. I would also like to thank the many UConn offices that helped this new program come into being. And of course the students: Thanks for making UConn First Summer the exciting program it is.

Abstract

In fall 2013, the Office of Summer and Winter Programs at the University of Connecticut (UConn) was charged by the Office of the Provost with creating a new, intensive summer program designed specifically for incoming freshmen and transfer students, to run for the first time the following summer. The program, under the name UConn First Summer, was intended to achieve two primary purposes: to offer incoming students a head start on their academic work and, no less significantly, to immerse them in a campus experience aimed at building college skills. This paper outlines the process of building the program, leading up to the resulting program launch in July 2014. The paper lays out the various pieces of this process, including marketing, curriculum development, and event and activity planning. A significant part of the paper discusses how each stage of the program build required addressing a range of challenges, resulting primarily from institutional obstacles and the compressed time line for the program's creation.

On Your Mark: Fall 2013

In October 2013, the Office of Summer and Winter Programs at the University of Connecticut (UConn) was realigned to report to the Office of the Provost, having previously reported to the vice president of Enrollment Planning and Management. One of the first charges to the newly aligned program (and its new director) was the creation of a summer program specifically designed for incoming UConn freshmen and transfer students. The vice provost for Academic Affairs had already drafted a brief on the program, under the working title “Husky First Summer” (Reis, 2013). This original draft document outlined a program born primarily of a desire to offer incoming UConn students the sort of head start offered by federal and state-funded summer bridge programs through a combination of strong introductory coursework and extracurricular programming aimed at smoothing the transition to college—or, in the case of transfer students, to UConn. The draft proposal described a four-week program, during which incoming UConn students would take two academic courses—and perhaps a third one-credit study skills class—while availing themselves of a range of optional enrichment activities.

With this document in hand, the director and assistant director for marketing and outreach for the Office of Summer and Winter Programs undertook a seven-month design and build of this new program, which successfully launched in July 2014. This paper outlines that process and the challenges faced in building the program from the ground up, especially in a condensed timeline.

Preparing for the Race: Measuring the Course

As we began the process of crafting the program in October 2013, we quickly realized the importance of understanding where this program fit on the national spectrum of summer programs of this type. The two most common types of “before college” summer programs around the country are pre-college (rising high school students) programs and “bridge” programs (for incoming students, usually grant-funded and limited to students of predefined populations). UConn First Summer hoped to be a hybrid program, similar to a bridge program, but open to *any* admitted and confirmed (deposited) fall start student.

Although UConn has a well-established bridge program (the Student Support Services summer program), it has never been active in pre-college summer offerings; in fact, it was only after we were a month or so into our build that we discovered UConn was building its *first* pre-college program at that moment—which meant that both First Summer and the new pre-college launched at virtually the same time. Unlike at many other institutions, pre-college at UConn is aligned with the Early College Experience (high school co-op) program, so our work took place on parallel but completely separate tracks.

Included in the vice provost’s program pitch were a series of key phrases: “become better prepared,” “enhance your opportunities,” “immersion into campus experience,” “enrichment”—and, not to be downplayed, “air-conditioned dorms” (Reis, 2013, n.p.). Her document and the research into other programs were the basis and guiding principles for the program. There were in fact a number of well-known First Summer-like programs around the country, similar in aim to our proposed program, namely:

- the Freshman Edge and Summer Start programs at the University of California, Berkeley; the University of California, Santa Barbara; and the University of California, Irvine
- the Summer Start program at North Carolina State University
- the Freshmen First program at the University of Maryland
- the Learning Edge Academic Program (LEAP) at Pennsylvania State University

As we reviewed these programs, we found ourselves with a growing list of questions about a wide range of topics, from cost, student aid, and matriculation to curriculum, registration, housing, meals, and marketing.

These weren't surprising areas of consideration, but they added up to a rather daunting list of to-dos. Although the Summer Program at UConn has been in existence, in one form or another, since the early part of the 20th century, it has run as a traditional "summer school"—that is, it has, from its various homes (continuing studies, the registrar, enrollment management, now the provost) been in the business of offering courses in person or, more recently, online, to both UConn and non-degree students. The Summer Program has *not*, at UConn, been in charge of creating full-fledged residential programs involving housing, meals, events, scholarships, etc. So this was all new.

As we talked to colleagues around the country, it became evident that institutional differences would define what First Summer would be. Unlike Penn State's large, highly successful LEAP program, UConn would be limited by its "summer trailing" status—meaning that students would not be offered the chance to matriculate in the summer. Rather, we would enroll these students in a "non-degree matriculated" category, which identified them as incoming students who, until the fall, would technically hold a non-degree status. Courses they took during First Summer, therefore, could remain on their non-degree transcripts—resulting in a kind of safety net—or simply be tagged in the fall, after their first mandatory advising meeting, for transfer to their degree transcript. Unlike programs that had developed unique courses, UConn would feel our way into it by letting students take courses already on the books, with the recommendation that they include a First Summer foundation course—i.e., one of five general education courses that would run as official First Summer classes. Similarly, all First Summer classes would run with both First Summer and non-First Summer students, for both enrollment management and academic reasons.

Other similarities and differences emerged as we worked through our own institutional capacities and limitations. For example, students at UConn would live together during the program in a residence hall designated for summer students, but they would have to move out or go home between the end of the program and their move-in date for fall semester. As there is no single dorm or cluster of dorms for all freshmen at UConn, Residential Life couldn't safely house students during the summer in their fall halls, something other institutions have been able to accommodate.

Finally, one of our earliest decisions, while the program was still a working idea, was to change the name to "UConn First Summer" to reflect the university's recent official rebranding with its familiar nickname.

Assembling a Team and Forging Partnerships

Partly as a result of the newness of many aspects of building UConn First Summer, the responsibility for the build rested primarily with two members of the summer and winter programs office: the director and assistant director for marketing. By the end, all of the summer program staff would contribute in some way to the success of First Summer. However, it soon became clear that the program would fail without the direct involvement of a number of offices across campus, including, crucially, the advising community (especially those in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences), various academic departments, admissions, the Honors Program, the registrar, Dining Services, and Residential Life. Less directly, but still of great importance as we got further into the process, were the bursar, financial aid, student activities, student recreation, university communications, and others.

One unplanned but important result of building UConn First Summer was the reinvigoration of connections to many of these offices. The collaboration that had to take place with some of these groups has led to new or reaffirmed relationships that have benefited the summer program at large.

An Early Hurdle

Perhaps the earliest significant challenge to building the program was the discovery that we would be limited to contacting admitted freshmen and transfer students *after* they had paid their deposits (due May 1)—which meant that some students wouldn't hear about our program until the first week or two of May. Perhaps understandably, the admissions office and the Office of the Vice President of Enrollment Management were concerned about adding a variable to an already complex admissions and confirmation process. Whether and how UConn First Summer would affect admitted students' decision to come to UConn was an unknown, and it was decided to hold off contacting them until they had definitely chosen UConn. There was a logic in that, as of course the primary audience is students who know for sure they are coming to UConn, but the constraint had an obvious impact on the timing of our marketing. Rather than having a blanket marketing approach, we had to approach marketing in waves. The admissions office was fully cooperative in sharing weekly lists of deposited students as early as mid-March, and we rolled out First Summer brochures and emails as those lists arrived. Using a worst-case situation in which a student first heard about the program in early May, we planned for a process of communication to registration to confirmation to arrival to take place in a two-month period, as the program was slated to run beginning July 7.

Get Set: Winter 2014

The bulk of the early planning took place in the winter months of 2014. Despite the tremendous usefulness of other institutions' websites (and a few much-appreciated phone conversations with colleagues at several institutions), it seemed early on that every definite decision was immediately followed by much second-guessing.

The questions outnumbered the answers, and each answer led to more questions. Should we incorporate community outreach as a program element? Should we create custom First Summer classes or use classes on the books already? Were two classes right or one? What about the Study Skills course? Should we bundle classes for easier choosing and scheduling? Should we request that orientation accommodate our program with special First Summer slots? What about an inspirational lecture series?

Setting the Course

We were nearly overwhelmed with choices—and lots of good advice. The advice was well taken, but it became apparent at some point during the winter that we would have to settle for making well-informed, although at times arbitrary, decisions in order to complete the process on time.

Drawing heavily on the advice of the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and senior staff in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences advising center, the Honors Program, and the registrar's office, we made some significant choices that would define the program's first iteration:

- run the program in five (not four) weeks and run it alongside or within our Summer Session 2 so as to make use of already set Summer 2 courses
- require participants to take two courses
- engage “star” professors to teach five “core” general education courses in communication, psychology, philosophy, music, and natural resources that would form the backbone of the program (although students would be invited to choose a second course from full Summer 2 offerings)
- offer an Honors Core course only for honors students in economics, also taught by a well-regarded professor
- ask students to attend orientation as usual (dates of their choice), so long as they completed orientation by the start of First Summer
- charge normal tuition and fees and room-and-board costs—but have no additional programmatic fee
- leverage orientation advising meetings (as best we could, given timing complexities) to have advisers review First Summer course choices

Making Marks and Making Compromises

Around the same time, we set the timeline for communication and marketing and the registration process, and decided to mail all deposited students a postcard and full brochure. We developed the First Summer website to provide full program details, logistics, and more, and branded the program in all print marketing, emails, the website, and promotional items such as T-shirts.

Not having time or resources to build an application form, we used the UConn-licensed Qualtrics survey site to create the actual registration form. From the survey we downloaded responses, tracked registration and other information through Excel spreadsheets, and created template confirmation emails and other standard communications.

Due to the regulations attached to most forms of financial aid, we confirmed that UConn First Summer students would be ineligible for aid, as they would be attending First Summer as “non-degree matriculated” students. To offset the negative impact this would have on the build (and growth) of the program, with the provost’s permission we created a Provost’s UConn First Summer scholarship that had enough funding to bring approximately five students with demonstrated high financial need to the program, all costs covered.

Sprinting to the Finish: Spring 2014

By March, the website was up, and the first mailings went out in a trickle to students who had paid deposits shortly after admission to UConn. In April, we pitched the program at the Spring Open House, which is aimed primarily at admitted students in the process of making attendance decisions; we also started preparations for the final months, including holding biweekly meetings with Residential Life and hiring three students to help in the lead-up to and during the program.

The Pace Quickens: Lost in Minutiae

In the final two months, we turned our attention to building the programmatic elements, such as special events and activities that ranged from ones designed specifically for First Summer (e.g., weekly academic skills workshops, an eco-tour, and a local foods BBQ) and others that were ready-made (e.g., rock climbing and paddle boarding from student recreation, dairy bar tours from Dining Services). We put the final touches, with help from conference services, on the Welcome and Dessert Reception, which would formally launch the program the evening before classes began.

In the overwhelming final weeks, we immersed ourselves in the micro tasks (nametags, signage, stuffing tote bags, images to embellish cookies). The advising process that never really worked, and a course selection process that was overwhelming to students, along with several other problems, were put on the list of to-dos for 2015.

Go! Reaching the Finish Line and Beyond

On the brilliantly sunny and warm evening of July 6, 2014, we greeted 43 First Summer students, and over the next five weeks, interacted with them and cajoled them to attend events. They took courses—and almost all of them performed better in those courses than summer students taken at large. They came from 10 states, represented majors across most of our schools, and were diverse in every way.

Lessons Learned

We learned many lessons in the design and implementation of the program. Perhaps the most critical was the need to change the curriculum and advising process. We were limited by the need to work with the existing summer orientation structure, which had students arriving for orientation—by their own choice—any time from mid-May to early July, just before the start of the program. Although the orientation office communicates regularly with academic advisors, there was no clear line of communication in place between the Summer and First Summer program and orientation. Additionally, the orientation office could not reasonably be expected to create a separate orientation slot for First Summer attendees with so little notice and for a relatively small number of students. So we did our best to notify advisers in advance when First Summer students were coming to orientation, with the hope that advisers could review and approve their First Summer course choices at that time. This approach was hit or miss, at best.

Perhaps our greatest takeaway is that, for all the similarities with other programs around the country, First Summer is a uniquely UConn program. Other programs can be used as models, but it is the uniqueness of an institution that leads to a particular set of challenges in building a new program—and to the unique strengths that will define the program once it is built. As with summer (and winter) programs more broadly, we have much to learn from each other—but our institution's own brand of getting things done is as important in our day-to-day work as the national trends, the enterprise systems, and the constant juggling of academic and revenue-driven concerns that propel all of our work. At the end of the day, UConn's initial First Summer, however quickly built, was successful. First Summer students whom we have talked to indicated the program made a difference. They built friendships and had meaningful experiences. When we want to market the program, we stand back and let students talk about their experiences.

Epilogue

In 2015, nearly 80 students attended UConn First Summer. While we were unable to implement a unique orientation track, we addressed the problem by having the academic advising community both select the eight core First Summer courses and pre-identify which two-course “bundles” would work for students' majors, thus minimizing the need for advisers to review course selections. This was a key improvement, given how little time advisers have for activities outside of orientation work during the summer. Additionally, we hired two alumni of the 2014 program to act as residential student mentors to the program. This, and making the once-a-week formal First Summer programs mandatory, was in direct response to our struggle to entice participants to extracurricular activities. The mentors were literally embedded programmatic liaisons, with high hopes of boosting outside-of-class involvement. Unfortunately, we were not wholly successful with this aspect of the program in 2015 and are looking to more clearly tie the extracurricular programs to the academic courses in the future. This, like other aspects of the program, is a work in progress.

Biography

Susanna Cowan, director of the Office of Summer and Winter Programs at the University of Connecticut, has a PhD in English literature and a Master's in library science. Her areas of scholarly interest and professional activity include technology and education, qualitative research, student engagement, and outreach.

References

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