

Peter Higgins
Gordon State College’s Newly Redesigned New Student Orientation
Portfolio for the 2019 Regents’ Momentum Year Award for Excellence in Advising and Student
Success

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November 27, 2018

University System of Georgia
270 Washington Street, SW
Atlanta, GA 30334-1450

Re: Gordon State College Orientation Planning Committee nomination

Regents' Momentum Year Award for Excellence in Advising & Student Success Committee:

It is my honor to recommend Gordon State College's Orientation Planning Committee for the Regents' Momentum Year Award for Excellence in Advising and Student Success. Our motto at Gordon State is "where students flourish." Unfortunately, it took a "perfect storm" of events for us to realize that we needed to completely overhaul our New Student Orientation (NSO) process. The "flourishing" begins, not in students' first classes, but in their orientations before they ever begin classes. In order to positively impact student success, and therefore retention, we determined it was essential to make advising the central feature of NSOs, and that all of us on campus have a role to play.

We established a truly interdisciplinary team to serve as the GSC Orientation Planning Committee, situated in Academic Affairs, but with representatives from Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Finance & Administration who designed a completely new NSO experience, with the primary goal of helping students make a purposeful choice regarding their major. In addition, during the NSOs, advisors worked to ensure students had a schedule that included at least 30 hours in the first year, Area A math and English courses during the first year, and at least 9 hours in their academic focus area. Furthermore, these schedules were based on detailed program maps that students use for clear guidance toward timely graduation. Perhaps most importantly, during the NSOs, students began a process of developing a productive mindset to increase the likelihood of their flourishing, not just during their first year, but for their entire experience at Gordon State.

In the portfolio you will find descriptions and data that point to a transformational experience for our students. It gives me great pride to recommend our newly restructured New Student Orientation, and the team that developed the program, for this prestigious award.

Respectfully,



C. Jeffery Knighton, Ph.D.
Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs

Narrative

Gordon State College's nomination for the 2018 Regents' Momentum Year Award for Excellence in Advising and Student Success is our completely overhauled, newly designed New Student Orientation (NSO) process. Although the final measure of our new NSO's impact on student success is not yet known, we are already seeing encouraging results that suggest our new NSO is indeed meeting the Momentum Year Award's general goal of creating "trajectory towards student success and completion."

The opportunity to remake our NSO from the ground up came as a result of strategic decision made late in the Spring 2017 semester: Gordon State eliminated all orientations for the upcoming academic year. Like many University System of Georgia institutions, Gordon State was facing enrollment challenges, and some senior administrators felt that requiring GSC students, many of whose families face significant financial challenges, to attend an all-day NSO presented an obstacle to enrollment. Thus, in the summer of 2017, GSC held a number of optional Celebration Dinners for incoming new students and their families, but nothing resembling a traditional orientation.

The Fall 2017 semester kicked off on the GSC campus with much hope and optimism (enrollment was up for the first time in years!), but faculty, staff, and administration quickly began to suspect that eliminating NSOs was a mistake. As an access institution, GSC serves a significant number of students who are underprepared for college, but the Fall 2017 cohort of new freshmen seemed even less ready than previous cohorts. Faculty shared grim stories, focused on two common themes: students' widespread disengagement, and their lack of understanding regarding college workload and faculty expectations. Even early in the semester, there was data to support those anecdotal accounts: the number of referrals to GSC's Always Alert academic warning system skyrocketed; however, the percentage of first-year students who actually attended their mandatory Always Alert intervention dropped below 50% for the first time, a troubling statistic that seemed to confirm faculty accounts of student disengagement. The number of mid-term F's reported for first-semester students skyrocketed to an all-time high: the 1,025 Fs earned by Fall 2017 new freshmen almost tripled the number from the previous fall (345). Drilling down into the midterm F data revealed an even more disturbing picture. Those 1,025 Fs represented 17.47% of all classes in which Fall 2017 new freshmen were enrolled; that was more than double the percentage from the previous Fall semester (8.41%). Even more troubling was the fact that 558 unduplicated students had earned those 1,025 F's; to put that number in perspective, a shocking 51% of all new freshmen were failing at least one class at midterm. Again, this represented a doubling over the previous fall semester (26.28%). Academic Affairs administrators, who had worked so hard to improve GSC retention rates, began bracing themselves for the worst.

In December, after final grades were posted and academic statuses were updated, those worst fears were realized: a total of 272 new freshmen were suspended, almost doubling the number from the previous Fall semester (147), which was the first semester for the college's new, more stringent academic standing policies. Even allowing for increased Fall 2017 enrollment, the academic suspension numbers were grim: those 272 suspended students

represented one quarter (24.79%) of the entire incoming freshmen class, a significant increase compared to the Fall 2016 rate (17.54%). Furthermore, there was a similar increase in the number of freshmen who ended their first semester on academic probation. In fact, barely half—52%—of new GSC freshmen who started in Fall 2017 ended their first semester in Good Academic Standing. The poor performance of new freshmen stood in stark contrast to the relatively encouraging data from continuing students: 87.61% of those students ended Fall 2017 in Good Academic Standing, a 5% improvement over the previous semester. Clearly, student success among continuing students continued to improve at GSC while the Fall 2017 cohort of new freshmen struggled at historic rates. Many on campus wondered if the total lack of onboarding lay at the center of the problem.

This bad news was playing out against the backdrop of the University System of Georgia's extensive Momentum Year efforts. Campuses had begun putting together Momentum Year plans in September of 2017. Already alarmed by the early indicators of academic struggle among freshmen, the GSC Momentum Year team had unanimously agreed to focus its Momentum Year efforts on re-imagining and rebuilding its NSOs; by December, the GSC team learned that it had won a \$10,000 Momentum Year Grant for its NSO plan, one of only eight schools in the USG to earn that distinction. On campus, an Orientation Planning Committee (OPC) was formed. Given the Momentum Year focus, administrators decided that the newly redesigned orientations would "live" in Academic Affairs; previously, Student Affairs had been responsible for planning and running orientations. Key faculty were recruited to plan the NSO program, and staff from all over the campus volunteered their support. As a first step, the OPC conducted extensive research, using NODA's *Designing Successful Transitions* manual and advice from Dr. John Gardner, who had presented at the GSC Student Success Summit the previous summer. Best practices in new student orientations were identified, and an exhaustive survey of other USG schools' orientation programs was conducted. With this strong foundation, the OPC intentionally built the new NSOs around the three Momentum Year principles:

1. **Helping students make a purposeful choice:** The orientation planning team chose to make the centerpiece of the new orientations a 75-minute academic focus/advising session. At each NSO, students were sorted by intended meta-major/focus area and escorted to the appropriate session by student orientation leaders. In these sessions, students got detailed information about prospective majors in the focus area and other crucial matters such as the core curriculum and college workload expectations. If during these sessions students decided that their intended major was not for them, they were escorted to a different session that better fit their future plans. If they decided *after* the session to change their intended major, they could note so on a scheduling survey. Such students were also given information about GSC's Career Services Center.
2. **Scheduling students for 30 hours in the first year, including Math and English, and 9 hours in a focus area:** GSC deans and department heads had worked tirelessly during the Spring 2018 semester to develop program maps that outlined detailed schedules totaling 30-32 hours for the first two semesters, including English and Math, and 9 hours

in a focus area. Because GSC is an access institution that attracts a significant number of freshmen with Learning Support requirements, GSC's Student Success Center advisors developed alternative maps for students who were not "program ready" and thus could not follow the department or school maps. These alternative maps were also designed to give students at least 30 hours in the first year, including Math and English, and at least 6 focus-area hours if 9 hours were not possible. In its most difficult decision, going against previous practice, GSC decided to control the schedule-making process for new freshmen, hiring 6 hand-selected faculty to make 15-to-16 hour Fall schedules for students *after* each NSO. The NSO team felt strongly that better schedules could be made away from the sound and fury of crowded, sweaty computer labs at the end of a long, tiring NSO day—and by eliminating parents' well-meaning but often counterproductive influence from the schedule-making process. During the NSOs, both students and parents were introduced to the Momentum Year philosophy, particularly the academic and financial advantages of 15-16 hour semester schedules. Schedules were completed and available to students by the Tuesday after Friday NSO's. Students were allowed to request changes once they received their schedules, but only by contacting a member of the schedule-making team.

3. **Instill an academic mindset in students:** Gordon State carefully designed its new first-year seminar, FIRE 1000, a mandatory core-curriculum class for all freshmen, to promote both a growth mindset and a sense of social belonging. However, the orientation planning team also used the NSO itself to jumpstart that important task. In both the student and the parent programs, information about the importance of FIRE 1000 was presented. Students and parents alike heard that all new freshmen struggle in college; that every new student should expect to struggle on some level during their first semester; and that it was how students reacted to that struggle that would determine their success. Both parents and students were informed about the expectations that college faculty had for students. GSC student orientation leaders led one session so that incoming freshmen could hear from their peers about college expectations and realities; students also heard a similar message from faculty in a separate session.

Work on the new NSO continued through May of 2018, with the original Orientation Committee dividing into more specific subcommittees. Finally, armed with an Academic Affairs-led program focused on supporting the USG's Momentum Year principles, GSC test drove its product on May 29, with a small, hybrid Summer/Fall event. Larger events for new Fall freshmen were then held throughout the summer: two in June; three in July; and one in early August. After each event, the NSO team tweaked the program, based on their own impressions; feedback from the campus at large; and same-day survey results from students and parents. The NSO team genuinely felt that each successive NSO was better than the previous one, and as the Fall 2018 semester began, we were cautiously optimistic that the new NSOs would make a difference.

Data and Evidence

At the time we are submitting this document, final academic results from the Fall 2018 freshmen cohort are not yet available, but we have seen encouraging data that suggests the redesigned GSC NSO is meeting a variety of the Regents’ Momentum Year Award for Excellence in Advising and Student Success criteria:

1. Engaging in institutional advising practices which promote the metrics of the Momentum Year.

By preaching the merits of taking and passing 30 hours in the first year; by removing schedule-making for new freshmen from the crucible of computer labs on NSO day; and by controlling that registration process tightly, in Fall 2018 GSC dramatically increased the number of new freshmen enrolled in 15 or more hours, effectively doubling the percentage from Fall 2017, when there were no NSO’s, and more than tripling the Fall 2016 percentage, when NSO’s had a different format that included mass scheduling/schedule-changing sessions on NSO day. Simultaneously, as expected, the percentage of new freshmen who are enrolled part-time reached an all-time low, as seen here in Table 1:

TABLE 1

		Fall 2016		Fall 2017		Fall 2018	
Credit Hours		Student Count	Percent	Student Count	Percent	Student Count	Percent
New Freshman	Part-Time	114	13.62%	86	7.84%	57	7.00%
	FT 12-14	562	67.14%	675	61.53%	260	31.94%
	FT 15+	161	19.24%	336	30.63%	497	61.06%
	Total	837	100.00%	1097	100.00%	814	100.00%
Continuing	Part-Time	1024	37.77%	834	35.98%	766	34.64%
	FT 12-14	1207	44.52%	951	41.03%	895	40.48%
	FT 15+	480	17.71%	533	22.99%	550	24.88%
	Total	2711	100.00%	2318	100.00%	2211	100.00%

It is worth noting that the percentage of *continuing* students enrolled in 15 or more hours rose only modestly over the past three years and is currently less than half the percentage of new freshmen, suggesting that the increased number of students with 15+-hour schedules is the intentional result of the NSO planning team. Even after the midterm withdrawal deadline, the percentage of new freshmen who attended an NSO and were still enrolled in 15 or more hours was 59%; so, even when given a chance to reduce their loads, most new freshmen opted to stand pat with 15+ hours.

As one might expect, the increased percentage of new freshmen taking 15 or more hours impacted another important metric: average number of credit hours registered per student. As Table 2 below indicates, in Fall 2018, new freshmen enrolled in an

average of 14.34 hours, almost a full hour more than Fall 2017 freshmen (13.50), many of whom registered themselves without benefit of an orientation or any significant academic advising help. And the Fall 2018 average is almost a full hour-and-a-half more than the average of Fall 2016 new freshmen (12.89), who were the last cohort to go through the old NSO model:

TABLE 2

Term Code	201608		201708		201808	
Student Group	Student Count	Avg. Credit Hours Per Student	Student Count	Avg. Credit Hours Per Student	Student Count	Avg. Credit Hours Per Student
New Freshman	837	12.89	1097	13.50	814	14.34
Continuing	2711	11.55	2318	11.82	2211	11.93

Similar to Table 1 above, we can see that the average credit hours for continuing has remained essentially flat over the past three years. Again, the gains seen for Fall 2018 freshmen are the result of intentional planning by GSC's OPC to support Momentum Year principles and meet Momentum Year goals.

2. Engaging students in a program of study that provides a clear path to graduation and a career or further study.

As noted above, in Spring 2018, guided by the discussion at the Fall 2017 Momentum Year Advising Academy, Gordon State's deans and academic department heads worked hard to complete program maps for every degree pathway. These documents outlined semester-by-semester course plans, with an emphasis on encouraging students to earn 30 credit hours in their first year. In addition, while putting together the maps, deans and department heads paid particular heed to the Momentum Year mantra, repeated so often by Vice-Chancellor Tristan Denley, that only students in majors or pathways that eventually require Calculus should be enrolled in MATH 1111 (College Algebra) as their Area A Math class. All other students should take MATH 1001 (Quantitative Skills and Reasoning). In the past, GSC advisors had not always followed that philosophy; College Algebra was too often the default Area A Math choice for all students, no matter what their major.

With our new NSO and its attendant change in registration philosophy still in its infancy, obviously it is too soon to look at key metrics for the Fall 2018 cohort like average number of hours taken toward a degree, number of major changes, and other telling measures. It's too early to determine whether the NSO has indeed helped students with a clearer path to a career or further study. However, GSC has already seen some early data that suggests the new NSO is helping to put students on a clearer path to graduation. More specifically, not only have we seen a marked increase in the number of new freshmen taking 15 or more hours; we have also seen more of those freshmen

getting into the appropriate math course in their first semester, clearing one big hurdle in the journey to graduation. The results are startling, as seen in Table 3 below:

TABLE 3

	# of Freshmen Enrolled in College Algebra (MATH 1111)	Percentage of Freshmen Enrolled in College Algebra	# of Freshmen Enrolled in Quantitative Skills and Reasoning (MATH 1001)	Percentage of Freshmen Enrolled in Quantitative Skills and Reasoning
Fall 2017	567	62.5%	339	37.4%
Fall 2018	172	31.8%	368	68.14%

The percentage of new freshmen enrolled in MATH 1111 was essentially halved; almost 70% of new freshmen are taking MATH 1001 as their Area A math course, which more accurately reflects the freshmen cohort’s distribution of intended majors. We feel strongly that such results would not have been achieved using the “old” NSO registration method: mass scheduling and schedule-changing at the end of a long day of orientation, using overworked and inexperienced faculty pressed into service because they happen to be teaching summer classes.

3. Fostering a purposeful choice among students and assisting in the development of a productive mindset among advisees which best aligns with the student’s aspirations, aptitudes, and potential for success.

GSC was ahead of the curve in eliminating “undecided” as a major/pathway option for incoming students. However, in the ensuing years, incoming students who were unsure about majors/academic pathways started to choose General Studies when they applied; General Studies became GSC’s de facto “undecided” major. This trend was problematic from academic advising and scheduling perspectives: General Studies is a non-STEM program at GSC, but many STEM-oriented students would choose it every year because they were undecided between two different STEM majors; or they did not see their exact intended STEM major on the list of choices; or, as advisors often heard, they “just need[ed] the core because I am going to transfer after a year.” Of course, STEM majors and non-STEM majors take very different core math and science courses in that first year, and the result was that many General Studies “majors” who fully intended to pursue STEM fields were advised as non-STEM majors and directed into the wrong Area A math and Area D science classes. With an academic information/advising session at its heart, GSC’s new NSO is helping students make purposeful choices. This Fall we saw a significant decrease in the percentage of incoming freshmen who chose General Studies as their major, compared to the previous two Fall semesters (one with a different NSO format, and one without any NSO at all), as illustrated in Table 4 below:

Table 4

	# of all Freshmen declared as General Studies (AAAC) majors	% of all Freshmen declared as General Studies (AAAC) majors
Fall 2016	138	16.4%
Fall 2017	176	16.0%
Fall 2018	75	10.0%

The decrease from 16% to 10% percent represents a 37.5% improvement over one year.

4. Engaging in the systematic examination of issues about student success and engagement which promote retention, progression, and graduation.

As noted above, in Fall 2017, after a summer during which they were not given any orientation at all, GSC incoming freshmen cohort fared very poorly, earning 1,025 midterm F's, almost triple the number from the previous Fall. Those F's represented a stunning 17.4% of all classes in which new freshmen were enrolled, and 51% of all Fall 2017 freshmen earned at least one midterm F. While many factors contributed to the academic struggles of the Fall 2017 freshmen cohort, many on the GSC campus believed that the absence of NSO's played a big part. Students (and their parents) were not told about the increased responsibility and expectations that college brings; were not informed about student success resources; and were not connected to the campus in any meaningful way. The NSO planning committee worked intentionally to address all of the above in the new orientations, and, while the full picture of the Fall 2017 cohort's fate will not be known for another month, the midterm grade report is exciting and encouraging, reflecting a significant drop in midterm F's for the Fall 2018 freshmen cohort, as seen here in Table 5:

TABLE 5

New Freshmen			
	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Change
Midterm F count	1025	587	-43%
Classes Total	5943	4411	
Percent of all Classes	17%	13%	-23%
Undup. Students w/Midterm F	558	291	-48%
Undup. Student Total	1097	792	
Percent of Students	51%	37%	-28%

Drilling deeper into the midterm F data and looking at their distribution, we see even more encouraging signs:

- The percentage of new freshmen who received only one midterm F dropped from 25.8% in Fall 2017 to 17.6% in Fall 2018, an improvement of 31.7%.

- The percentage of new freshmen who received 2 or more midterm F's dropped from 25.1% in Fall 2017 to 19.3% in Fall 2018, an improvement of 23%.
- Within the group with two or more midterm F's, the percentage of students with at least 3 midterm F's—which we see as total disengagement—dropped from 12.4% in Fall 2017 to 10.4% in Fall 2018, an improvement of 16.1%

These numbers are even more encouraging in light of GSC's new midterm grade reporting policy. Fall 2018 was the first semester that all faculty were required to report all grades at midterm, and the Provost's Office enjoyed a 100% compliance rate. In past semesters, faculty were asked only to report midterm F's, and 100% compliance was uncertain. In Fall 2017, for example, 74 faculty reported no midterm F's in their classes; 26 of those faculty were teaching four or more sections, while 47 were teaching three or fewer. GSC would love to celebrate such concentrated pockets of student success; however, given the other midterm F data and GSC's mission as an access institution, such a happy outcome seems highly unlikely. It seems more probable that midterm F's were consistently underreported in the past, and fully reported for the first time in Fall 2018.

5. Engaging in the systematic examination of issues about student success and engagement which promote retention, progression, and graduation—qualitative data

In early October, just after midterm, we sent via email a “NSO Midterm Check-In Survey” to all new freshmen who had attended one of our re-imagined NSO's. Although we had surveyed both students and parents on the actual NSO day, we wanted students' perspectives on how well their orientation experience had prepared them for college success *after* they had just spent eight weeks on campus and in the classroom. Again, although it is very early on, the data is encouraging and suggests that our new NSO's were accomplishing the following goals we established:

Help connect students to the campus, campus culture, and campus community:

- 61.96% of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that attending the NSO resulted in a “great sense of institutional pride and respect for the college.” Only 10.87% “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed.”
- In response to the prompt “The New Student Orientation helped me acknowledge my individual responsibility to the campus community as well as ownership and responsibility for creating my college experience,” 58.7% of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed,” while only 4.35% “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed.”

Help students make the transition to the increased rigor of college academics:

- 51.09% of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that attending the NSO made them “feel more prepared to transition to college.” Only 12.5% “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed.”

Help students begin to develop appropriate academic mindsets:

- In addition to the encouraging responses above regarding the NSO’s contribution to helping students acknowledge “responsibility for creating my college experience,” 54.35% of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the NSO “increased my feeling that I belong in college.” Only 14.95% “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed.”

Perhaps most encouraging, 84.78% of survey respondents planned to return to GSC for a second year.



Gordon State College
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THE DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS AND PUBLIC SERVICE

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November 30, 2018

Dear Momentum Year Award for Excellence in Advising and Student Success Committee Members:

It gives me great pleasure to write you in support of Gordon State College (GSC) and the resurrection and revitalization of our New Student Orientation (NSO). During the Spring of 2018, we strategically chose faculty members to serve on our NSO Planning Team. Just as described, it was truly a team. The team was then tasked to break off into subcommittees. These subcommittees focused on the various tasks needed to present the most important tools that could be used to help students and parents prepare for the first year of college. In this case, as Jim Collins encourages, we got the right people on the bus and they were in the right seats.

With a student-centered focus, we began to identify ways not only to share the standard information regarding items such as FERFA, Campus Safety, and Financial Aid, but it also gave us a chance to paint the picture of what it meant to be a Highlander. The Highlander Culture included activities that inspired a sense of value, projected a sense of pride, and encouraged a sense of belonging.

After countless hours of preparation, our NSO development team streamlined into the NSO Implementation Team. This metamorphosis happened by identifying our members who embodied the spirit of high energy presentations. This enthusiasm, coupled with specialized faculty and staff, provided the expertise needed to bring the production to life. As a member of this team, I was tasked with four roles: greeter; facilitator, "What parents would like to ask professors"; small group leader, "The benefits of the African American Male Initiative (AAMI)"; and class-schedule modifier.

Although all these roles were equally important, as director of the GSC AAMI Program, serving as greeter and facilitator provided opportunities for me to build relationships with students and families who could be candidates to participate in the small group presentation on AAMI. In this breakout session, much like the Honors, Study Abroad, Student Activities, Student Success Center, and Learning Support sessions, these sessions gave presenters the opportunity to share their story and to use data to convey the relevance of each program. As Brene Brown said, "Vulnerability is not knowing victory or defeat, it's understanding the necessity of both; it's engaging. It's being all in." We were all in!



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At the conclusion of each NSO, we had a thorough debriefing and a full assessment of the event. We used surveys and each facilitator's feedback to continue to fine tune the agenda until it had evolved into a mechanism that could embody the essence of what it truly means when we collectively say, "HIGHLANDERS FORWARD."

Sincerely,

Ryan Traylor, MBA
Lecturer of HIM and Business,
Director Minority Advisement Program and
African American Male Initiate



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12/3/18

To Whom It May Concern:

I was asked to write a letter of support for Gordon State College's submission for a Regents' Momentum Year Award for Excellence in Advising and Student Success. I am very happy to do so. I am proud of the work that our institution accomplished in the last year in revising our New Student Orientation. I participated in some of that work, and I saw firsthand the difference it made and continues to make on our campus.

I have been an English Professor at GSC since 2001 and the Coordinator of the Honors Program since 2011. For a variety of reasons, it has seemed to many of us at GSC that our efforts toward orientation have been at best ineffectual and at worst counterproductive. For many years, it seemed that orientation was really about registration and not much more. For that reason, I can sympathize with the decision that was made in 2017 to discontinue the NSO altogether. However, Fall 2017 taught us how necessary NSO was. Our student success rates in 2017-18 indicated that we needed a new direction, so we had an opportunity to truly revise our approach. Under the direction of Assistant VP of Excellence Peter Higgins, we had the opportunity to create the NSO we wanted and deserved. I played a part on the planning subcommittee, which was made up of several faculty and staff members, and we developed a "momentum year" approach for both students and parents that was a major improvement over anything that I have seen on our campus in 17 years. There are two main features of last summer's NSO that stood out to me the most. The effort was a true collaboration. Representatives from all branches of our college were involved and participating, including students! The latter inclusion was itself a major improvement. Also, we succeeded in developing an orientation experience that was not focused on the details of schedule-making; we had teams of faculty working behind the scenes to ensure that each new student had an appropriate 15-hour first-semester college schedule. We were thus able to focus our energy on interacting with our new students and their families and introducing ourselves and our Highlander culture to them. It was an inspiring experience, one that has already paid off for us. I only hope that we continue to build on the momentum that we have established with this approach.

Sincerely,

Professor of English
Honors Program Director
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29 November 2018

Dear Momentum Year Award for Excellence in Advising and Student Success Committee Members:

I am a freshman at Gordon State College and am nearing the completion of my first semester here. Before Gordon I was a high school dropout and a GED recipient. I was extremely nervous about coming to Gordon, about engaging in a learning environment as challenging as college. Any of my friends could tell you that the week prior I was a nervous wreck. I was barely sleeping, I was shaking with both excitement and fear. I was scared that I would be unable to meet my goals as a freshman and that I would be unable to connect with my environment. My first real engagement with the college was my New Student Orientation.

The NSO began with a series of speeches on how to get registered for many basic portions of the college. It closed, however, with a speech from Dr. Nooks, our college president. He told us with fiery passion how important this step in our lives was. He sang the praises of working our hardest to complete our goals in the coming year. Most importantly to me, he implored us to honor the pasts that had gotten us here. His expressing that shook something in it. I had been ashamed of where I had been a year ago, but he was encouraging me to take pride in the work I had done in that year. I carry that with me.

They then separated us; I believe it was by major. They sent us out onto campus giving us a brief tour and introduction to the school. My student guide was a computer science major like me. She was very happy to be representing the STEM fields. She spoke to us about the campus, about the going-ons, about what campus life is about, and then opened herself up for questions. She explained that she was open to questions that a professor or and an adviser might not be able to answer.

We then were sent to speak with professors in our majors. We talked in quite a casual manner and got to know what each professor was like. This was the first time that I met my pre-calculus professor who would challenge me to love math in a way I hadn't before. Being given this moment to speak with our professors in a direct line with no concern for the subject matter helped me feel like I could speak with them again.

Next, we were all grouped up in one room where we were told about a few more pieces of the protocol. When the students informing us finished, they once again opened themselves up to questions about campus life. People asked about the best food on campus, people's favorite professors, the most interesting classes, and many more trivial questions. This helped get an organic sense of the college experience in a way I couldn't have imagined.

Finally, I met the coordinator of the honors program, Dr. Janssen. He talked to us about honors classes and the honors program in general. He worked very hard to get me into a class he thought I would be right for last moment. This massively changed my momentum. I am now a member of the honors program and the student honors council. By the end of the NSO my fears about being right for college, what college was even like, were completely gone.

Sincerely,

Lenix Carter

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a student here at Gordon State College that attended New Student Orientation (NSO) this past summer. The activities that took place during the orientation were well-planned. From check-in to the tour of dorms and everything in between, all aspects were filled with beneficial information. The part that I found the most beneficial was the grouping by majors. For example, I was in “Group E”, which was the group for business majors. This is beneficial because it showed me people with the same interests that I had, so it was easier to make new friends. The quality of all activities within the orientation was top-notch; I think that it was a wonderful addition for incoming freshmen.

As far as improving undergraduate retention is concerned, this will definitely help. If students are aware of what GSC has to offer, they are more likely to stay here for their bachelor’s degree and in turn increase our graduation rate. I can use myself as an example; now that I know that GSC has a four-year management & administration program, I am going to stay here to get my bachelor’s instead of transferring like I originally planned.

I’m glad that New Student Orientation was introduced. It is a wonderful tool for new freshmen to familiarize them with life at GSC. After attending NSO, I am now more

knowledgeable about things on campus. If the opportunity were to ever arise, I would be a NSO leader to show next year's freshmen what it's like here at GSC.

Best Regards,

Dakota K. Terrell

