PERC RESEARCH BRIEF

Orientation Programming Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brief 1 of the *Student Engagement Practice and Planning in the COVID-19 Environment* Research Series

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
RESEARCH CENTER

Based in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education, Health & Human Sciences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, the mission of the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) is to identify, conduct, and coordinate research on initiatives and ideas designed to enhance higher education at the institution, state, and national levels to enhance policy and practice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had monumental impacts on higher education institutions and the ways in which colleges and universities operate. Notably, there have been major shifts in how student affairs professionals facilitate meaningful student engagement in a time when in-person experiences are not possible. To date, the primary focus of most institutions has been on shifting instruction. Yet, researchers consistently have demonstrated that instructional practices alone are not sufficient to engage and ultimately retain students.

The study aims to address the following question: How is student engagement practiced in the age of a global crisis?

This brief will provide research insights on institutional plans for orientation programming and engagement plans for summer and fall 2020:

Four key themes emerged from the data:

1. A large proportion of institutions plan for traditional, on-campus experiences in the fall, but many are opting for online orientation programs.
2. There are noticeable differences in orientation engagement plans when examined by governance type.
3. There are noticeable differences in orientation engagement plans when examined by institutional size classification.
4. Influenced by public health guidelines, geographic region also plays a role in orientation engagement plans.

The study includes a "Promising Practices" section that focuses on programming philosophies, strategies, and initiatives that present potential for creating innovative and engaging orientation experiences.

For more information about the *Student Engagement Practice and Planning in the COVID-19 Environment* COVID-19 research series, visit perc.utk.edu.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, COVID-19 began to spread quickly through the United States. With many dangerous side effects and threats to health and safety, the spread of COVID-19 necessitated pause and/or adaptation in strategies for postsecondary education. By late March 2020, most institutions had ceased in-person campus operations and transitioned classes to online settings for the remainder of the term. As faculty transitioned academic and support services online, student affairs practitioners worked to maintain core engagement functions supporting student extracirricular and co-curricular experiences.

In June 2020, the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) at the University of Tennesse, Knoxville, embarked on studying institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in regards to plans for programming, services, and intiatives that occur beyond the classroom that aim to promote and facilitate student engagement.

The purpose of this project is to understand and to inform student engagement planning and practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team examined institutional plans and student engagement practices from a sample of 45 institutions through three models of engagement:

Traditional. Delivered on-campus, typically through in-person or face-to-face experiences

Online. Delivered through fully online, virtual, or digital strategies

Hybrid. Delivered through a combination of traditional in-person or face-to-face experiences and online or digital experiences

Figure 1. Institution-Wide Fall Engagement Plans

Institution Fall Engagement Plans

- Traditional: 35.6%
- Online: 8.9%
- Hybrid: 44.4%
- Plan not announced: 11.1%
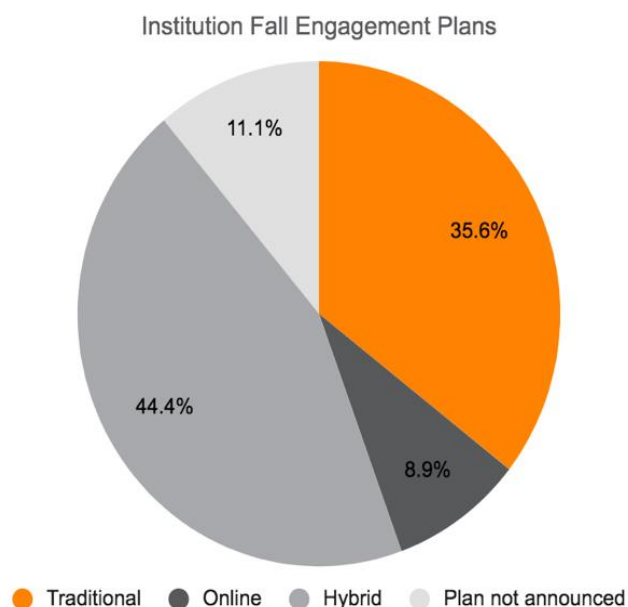
At the time of initial data collection, nearly half of colleges and universities in the sample (46%) planned to engage in hybrid engagement models at the institution-wide level in the fall. Just over a third (35%) reported plans to re-open in the fall with fully traditional engagement models. Few institutions had not announced their re-opening plans yet (11%), but even fewer announced plans for fully online (9%).

Institution-wide engagement plans will critically influence each functional area and will serve as a foundational base to address the primary study question:

How is student engagement practiced in the midst of a global crisis?

Leading student engagement scholar and Professor Emeritus of Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, Dr. John Braxton, weighs in on the importance of student engagement:

"Student engagement constitutes an important vehicle for college student success. Engagement and involvement are interchangeable terms (Tinto, 2012) that both pertain to the amount of physical and psychological energy students put into their college experience (Astin, 1984). Academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular stand as some of the forms of the college student experience in which student involvement takes place (Mayhew, et al., 2016). Interpersonal involvement includes faculty and student interactions and peer interactions (Mayhew, et al., 2016).

Student involvement fosters such aspects of college student success as first year persistence (Braxton, et al., 2014) and graduation (Tinto, 2012). Without persistence and or graduation, student attainment of other forms of success are unlikely occur. These other forms of student success include cognitive growth, career development, and a wide array of types of personal development. For the types of student development, consult *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works, Volume 3 by* **(Mayhew, et al., 2016).**

The COVID-19 Pandemic places major constraints on the various forms of student involvement in general and those in the form of face-to-face interaction in particular. In particular, the Pandemic will likely result in some students not returning to their college for the Fall 2020 Semester. Put differently, institutinal student persistence rates at some colleges and universities will decrease. Perhaps, some of the lessons learned from extensive use of remote teaching during the 2020 Spring semester may suggest ways in which colleges and universities can offer alternative approaches to student engagement during the Fall 2020 Semester and beyond as we continue to cope with the enormous challenges of the Pandemic."

Orientation is one of the first interactions new students have with their college or university and one of the first moments to feeled engaged with the campus community. Heather Kovanic, Director of Orientation & Transition Programs at the University of Delaware and NODA (Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education) President shares the following:

"Orientation and transition programs serve as a critical link between enrollment management and student affairs in higher education. Orientation and transition programs provide students with an abundance of crucial information about campus resources and academic expectations, while also introducing students to campus culture and community, which contributes to students' initial sense of belonging and connectedness with the institution. Through orientation,

students begin to engage actively with their new environment and peers, setting a strong foundation for student success not only in their first year, but through to graduation.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, orientation and transition professionals swiftly moved programming from in-person to virtual formats through dynamic online courses and experiences, as well as live interactive sessions that allow students to learn about and engage with their new campus community. Orientation and transition programs mobilized their peer leaders to serve as virtual guides for new students, helping them explore the engagement opportunities and campus resources that they will need to be successful in a hybrid or fully online environment this fall. Creating a sense of connection and belonging has required creativity and innovation, and campuses will implement orientation and transition programming in many different modalities this fall to meet the needs of new students. If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the vital importance of providing strong orientation and transition programs as these experiences may be the determinant of whether a student chooses to matriculate and their ultimate success, both academically and personally, in their first year."

This brief will provide high-level findings regarding the planned practices for orientation programming for summer and fall 2020. The findings presented in this brief

are sourced from a sample of institutions that represent diverse governance structures, size classificataions, geographic regions, as well as minority-serving institutions. Benchmarking methods were conducted utilizing publicly available data (i.e. institution websites, press releases, online communications, etc.) to identify proposed engagement models for orientation programming each institution.

II. MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Half of the institutions in the study sample announced and will implement online orientation programming leading up to the fall semester (Figure 2). Just under a quarter (22%) of institutions announced they will hold traditional on-campus orientation programming to welcome new students to campus. Among the institutions planning to host orientation programming on campus, the commonly reported practice is to hold orientation programming in conjunction with move-in and/or Welcome Week programs.

At the time of collection, thirteen percent of institutions had not announced their orientation plans yet, which is just slightly more than those who announced implementing hybrid programming models (11%) (Figure 2). The number of institutions that will implement hybrid orientation programming may rise in coming weeks. However, the mechanisms and implementation plans among those who have announced hybrid programming models vary greatly. Some have moved logistical sessions, such as advising, course registration, and technology onboarding to virtual settings along with providing students with online checklists to complete registration tasks. Among the institutions utilizing a hybrid model, the social community building components of orientation are slated to be included on-

campus programming taking place for
Welcome Week

Figure 2. Orientation Programming Models

Orientation Programming Models
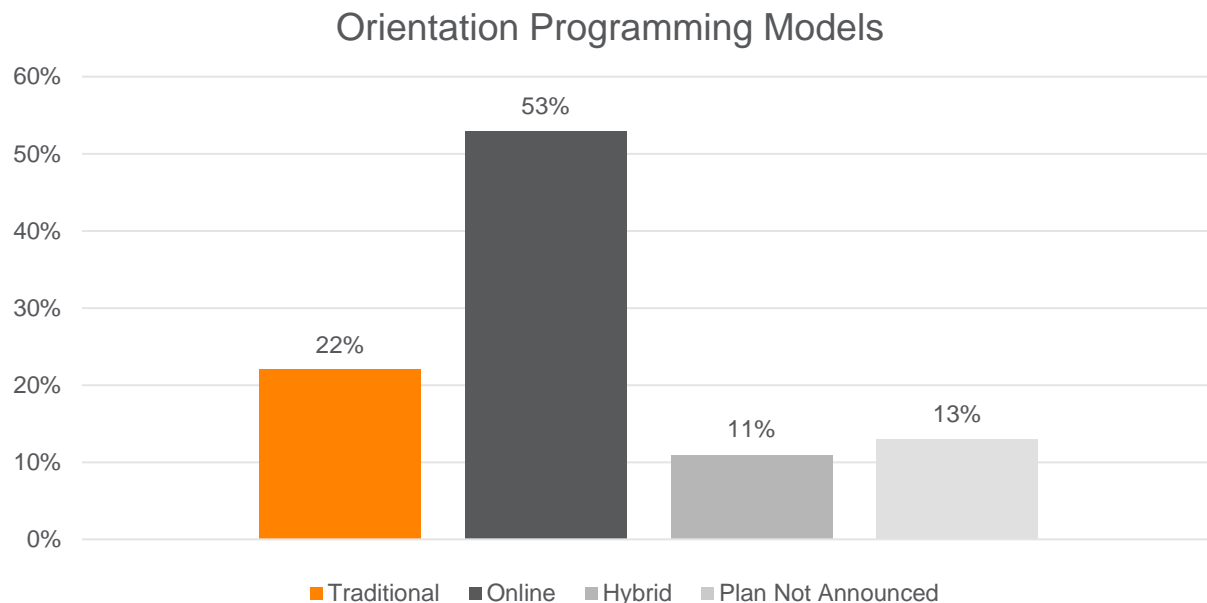
III. DIFFERENCES BY INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

This section focuses on findings that emerged when orientation programming plans were analyzed from various lenses based on institutional characteristics. With the context that public health policy and response varies greatly by location, the institutional characteristics of governance, size, and region served as primary categories to further explore how orientation is anticipated to be practiced by student affairs professionals in coming weeks and months. Governance analyzed differences between public and private institutions. Size classifications were guided and modified from the Carnegie Classifications for size and setting. Region was categorized by geographical location, for the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West.
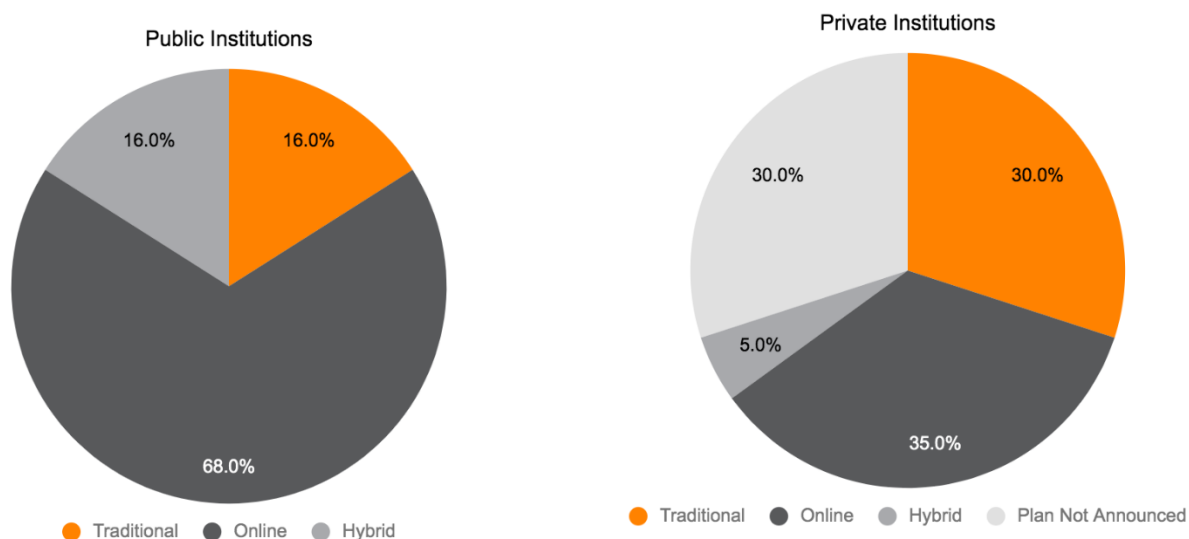
Governance

Among public institutions included in the study sample, all but one announced their plans for orientation programming implementation (Figure 3). The majority (64%) are employing online orientation experiences this summer leading into the fall semester. Among the few public institutions with plans to hold traditional in-person programming, these institutions have small to medium student populations and will host all orientation programming in conjunction with move-in and Welcome Week.

At the time of data collection, thirty percent of private institutions had not announced orientation programming plans (Figure 3).

Further, a third of private institutions who announced their plans have indicated they will be utilizing an online orientation programming model. Another 30% plan to host traditional on-campus orientation

programming and will pair orientation with move-in and Welcome Week. Just one private institution in the study sample indicated plans to hold a hybrid orientation program.

Figure 3. Orientation Programming Models, by Governance Type

Public Institutions

Traditional 16.0%, Online 68.0%, Hybrid 16.0%

Legend: Traditional, Online, Hybrid

Private Institutions

Traditional 30.0%, Online 35.0%, Hybrid 5.0%, Plan Not Announced 30.0%

Legend: Traditional, Online, Hybrid, Plan Not Announced

Size

Institutional size also appears to be a major contributing factor in regards to planning and implementing orientation programming (Figure 4). The majority (83%) of large institutions in the study sample announced that their orientation programming will occur in online settings. Few large institutions (6%) have indicated plans to utilize hybrid programming models for orientation programming. At the time of collection, there were no large institutions with plans to implement traditional orientation programs, but two institutions had not yet announced their plans. The gravitation of larger institutions towards online programming models makes sense as these institutions are likely to be planning to welcome cohorts of new students well into the thousands, which would make implementing traditional in-person orientation programs difficult while following social distancing guidelines.

Among medium-sized institutions in the study sample, nearly half (43%) reported plans to host orientation programs utilizing

a traditional engagement model, which is highest compared to other size groups. Just over a third (35%) of medium-sized institutions are planning to facilitate online programming (Figure 4). Even while the lowest within its size group, medium-sized institutions represented the largest portion (215%) of those planning to implement hybrid programming models when compared to large and small institutions.

At the time of collection, just one small institution had reported plans to operate a hybrid model of engagement for orientation programming. The remaining small institutions were evenly split (at 31%) between plans to operate online models, traditional models, or had not yet shared their plans (Figure 4). While it cannot be fully confirmed at this time, it can be

anticipated that small institutions will be welcoming smaller incoming cohorts of new students, which may allow them more

flexibility in their planning timelines as well as working to maintain safety guidelines for few people for any in-person events.

Figure 4. Orientation Programming Models, by Size Classification

Orientation Engagement Models, by Size Classification

Legend: Plan Not Announced, Hybrid, Online, Traditional
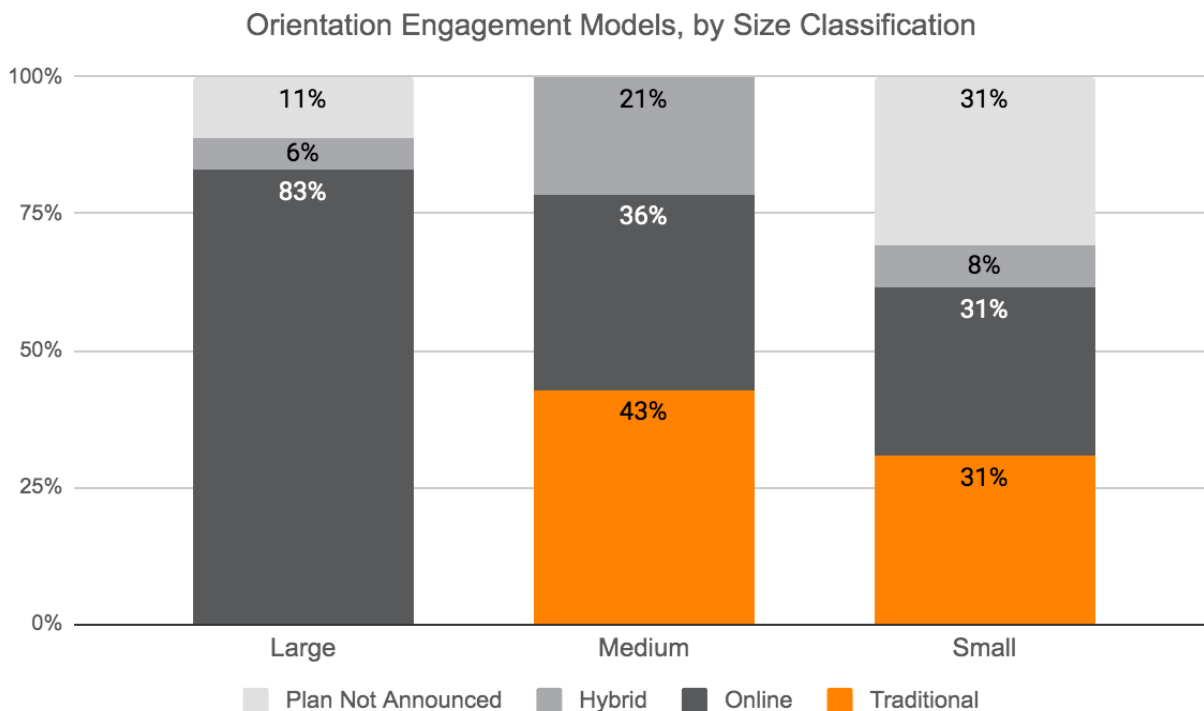
Region

As each city, county, and state are developing and implementing different guidelines and public health protocols, examining the sample by the geographical region in which institutions are situated helps illuminate differences in planned approaches to orientation. For those in the Southeast who have announced their plans, the largest portion (38%) plan to facilitate online programming models with traditional models next favored (23%). Fewer institutions in the Southeast favored hybrid engagement models for orientation. However, at the time of collection, more schools had not publicly shared orientations plans than those who favored hybrid models. Therefore, the number of schools planning for hybrid options could increase among institutions in the Southeast.

Northeastern schools similarly favored online models (50%), with few opting for traditional models and no institutions reporting plans for hybrid model implementation at this time.

In the Midwest and Southwest, online models are strongly favored, with 75% in the Midwest and all schools representing the Southwest are planning online orientation programs respectively. The West is more evenly split among those planning for online models and those planning for traditional programs, with only two opting for hybrid engagement models for orientation.

IV. PROMISING PRACTICES

For many institutions, the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated major changes in the ways in which they facilitated student engagement through orientation programming. While institutions are still in the process of adjusting to new practices, there are some trends that emerged within the sample to present new and accessible ways to ensure successful and effective orientation programming can be implemented. The following practices show potential promise to inspire new strategies and encourage positive orientation experiences for incoming students.

Reserving Time for Relationships

Several institutions that are hosting summer orientation days virtually will also host extra social events and sessions during their August move-in welcome week so that students can meet their peers and orientation leaders prior to the start of classes. While summer orientation sessions are traditionally a wonderful opportunity to build relationships with their peers, as well as gain mentorship and guidance from their orientation leaders, transferring these sessions online due to COVID-19 has strained the ability for students to organically form these bonds. By focusing the summer virtual orientation sessions to be informative of the institution and the student's entrance into higher education, Welcome Weeks can then be utilized to address the social integration into the institution.

Peer Leaders Go Virtual

At a number of institutions opting for online or hybrid models, the role of peer orientation and welcome leader is still in place. For example, Texas Tech University has opted to move their traditionally in-person orientation programming to virtual settings through online modules. However, they are still actively engaging their undergraduate leaders, "The Crew", to reach out and build relationships with incoming students, as well as holding resource fairs online each week. University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) is also utilizing New Student Advisors to build connections with incoming students through "Bruin to Bruin" small group sessions.

Meeting Demands with Flexibility

Two institutions report using the HyFlex model campus-wide, which has influenced their orientation plans accordingly. The HyFlex model draws from the course format that combines both in-person or face-to-face experiences with online experiences (Milman & et al., 2020). HyFlex models allow students to choose the model that works best for them, but both options provide equivalent learning for students (Milman & et al., 2020). The University of Idaho is one example of a HyFlex institution in which their orientation model is reflective. The University of Idaho plans to host in-person events in June and July, but will also offer parallel programming via video and virtual experiences. This is intended to offer experiences for incoming students that meet their comfort levels with in-person gatherings while also providing an inclusive opportunity for those who may not be able to attend an in-person event for other reasons, such as finances or other commitments.

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Milman, N., Irvine, V., Kelly, K., Miller, J., & Saichaie, K. (2020). 7 things you should know about the HyFlex course model   Retrieved from https://library.educause.edu/resources/2020/7/7-things-you-should-know-about-the-hyflex-course-model

APPENDIX A.

Forty-five (45) institutions of higher education were selected to be included in this sample. The following characteristics were considered in selecting institutions to be included in the sample:

- *Governance*: Determination between public or private governance structure
- *Degree Programs*: Determination between institutions that grant two-year or four-year degrees.
- *Size*: Classification based on total student population as determined and adapted by the Carnegie Classifications on size.
  - *Small*: Institutions serving less than 3,000 students
  - *Medium*: Institutions serving between 3,000 and 9,999 students
  - *Large*: Institutions serving 10,000 or more students
- Geographic Region: Classification based on regions comprised of the following states:
  - *Northeast:* MA, MD, ME, NJ, NY, PA, VA, and Washington D.C.
  - *Southeast:* GA, FL, KY, LA, MS, NC, TN
  - *Midwest:* IA, IL, IN, MN, and OH
  - *Southwest:* AZ, TX
  - *West:* CA, CO, ID, OR, WA
- Minority-Serving Status: Determination if the institution has a minority-serving designation.

The following institutions were included in the study sample:

- Adams State University
- Azuza Pacific University
- Clarion University
- Colgate University
- College of William & Mary
- DePauw University
- Dominican University
- East Los Angeles College
- Emory University
- Florida A&M University
- Gonzaga University
- Howard University
- Ivy Tech Community College
- Lone State College
- Miami-Dade College
- Mississippi University for Women
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Murray State University
- Northern Virginia Community College
- Northwestern University
- The Ohio State University
- The Pennsylvania State University
- Princeton University
- Seton Hall University
- Seton Hill University
- Sewanee, the University of the South
- Spelman College
- St. Mary's College of Maryland
- Tennessee State University
- Texas Tech University
- The University of Arizona
- The University of California, Los Angeles
- University of Central Florida
- University of Idaho
- University of Maine
- University of Minnesota, Morris
- University of Northern Iowa
- University of Southern California
- University of Tennessee, Knoxville
- University of Texas, Austin
- Valparaiso University
- Vanderbilt University
- Wake Forest University
- Willamette University
- Xavier University of Louisiana
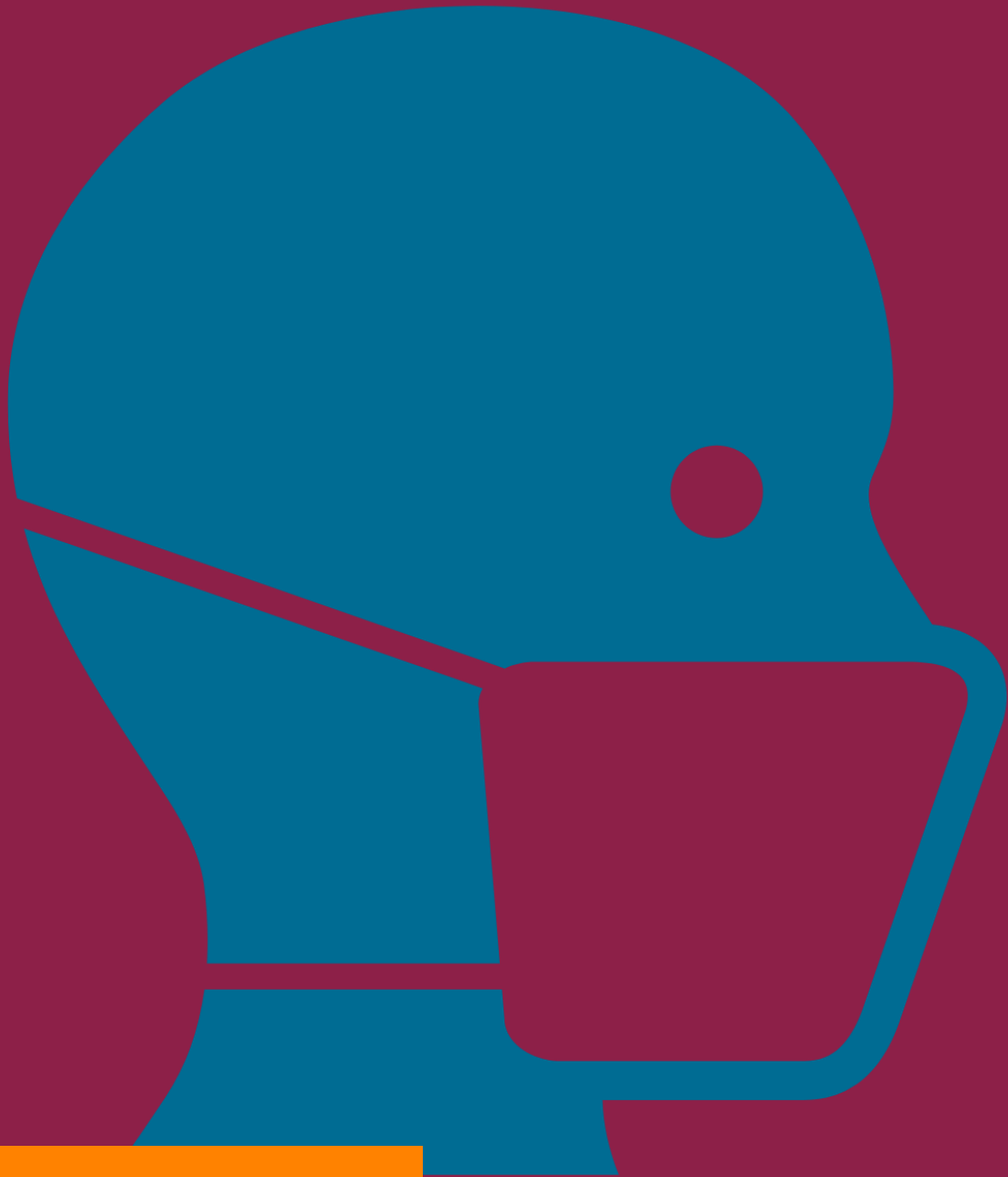
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