Discussion Paper: Extended Orientation and Transitions Program

For Consideration and Discussion

1 Purpose

The Orientation Program is an important element of a larger collection of programs and services that support student transition to StFX. The current StFX Orientation Program is heavily focused on orientation; however, there is potential for the program to serve as a catalyst for the beginning of a comprehensive, year-long transition, connecting students to learning and development opportunities.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to:

- Provide an overview of student orientation and transition in higher education
- Identify current promising practices in supporting student orientation and transition
- Propose an extended orientation and transitions model for StFX.

2 What is Student Transition?

Sample Definitions

- The process of entering and continuing through a particular institution of higher education and/or entering the same institution for a new purpose. This may include entering as a first-year student, transferring from a different institution, and/or entering an institution for a subsequent degree (e.g., entering graduate school) (NODA, 2021).

- Experiences of dislocation, disorientation and disruption; a process of adaptation characterised as multi-dimensional, complex and uniquely experienced by individuals (Meleis et al., 2000).

- A developmental transition in which physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral changes occur. Coinciding with these changes is risk-taking and experimentation with substances, sexual partners, and societal rules and norms (Kloep et al., 2015).

- A process of identity exploration, self-regulation, the development of new relationships and the separation of the individual from the family (Humphrey, 2009).

Common Elements

- Transition is a process, covering the entire first-year experience.
- Students' experiences of transition are not uniform. The process of transition is multi-dimensional, complex and uniquely experienced by individuals.
- Students can experience diverse challenges, including navigating a new environment, establishing new social networks and supports, and adjusting to academic expectations and commitments.
- Without the appropriate programs and supports, the ability to cope with stress during university transition can result in adverse health behaviours and can affect student mental health.

Sample Definition for StFX

At StFX, we define student transition is a continuum that starts when students accept an offer of admission up until the end of the second semester, and includes all curricular, co-curricular and personal experiences. This definition is informed by a developmental perspective. By focusing on transition as an ongoing process, we commit to applying and evaluating evidence-informed practices for supporting wholistic student success and well-being across the first-year experience.

3 What We Have Heard

Student Experience and Opportunity Plan

The importance of investing in the first-year experience is evident in StFX's work to develop the new Student Experience and Opportunity Plan (2022-2027). The following recommendations were identified:

- Frontload transitional resources, supports and experiences that as part of an evidence-informed orientation week connected to established learning goals.
- Extend student orientation and transitions programming through the entire first-year experience.
- Expand our understanding of the first-year experience to support diverse learners, including mature students, transfer students, and off-campus students.
- Develop tailored orientations and transitions programs to radically welcome historically-excluded students, including Black, Indigenous, minoritized, 2SLGBTQ+, international students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities.
- Apply Universal Design (UD) strategies to create student programming and engagement opportunities that are accessible to all learners.
- Work in collaboration with units across the institution to streamline communications as much as possible for accessibility and ease of information.
- Continue to assess and adapt our approach to meet the evolving needs of incoming students.
- Cultivate collaborative partnerships between and across curricular and non-curricular student experiences to create a seamless first-year transition.

Equity, Access and Inclusion

In 2021, the Presidents' Advisory Committee on Anti-Racism was convened to examine concerns regarding systemic discrimination and assist the University in gaining a better understanding of the experiences of racialized faculty, staff and students. The PACAR Interim Report 1 (October 2021) recommended a series of major categories of action, among which support for access and success.

To advance equity and inclusion StFX must "identify and address institutional barriers for (Indigenous, Black and other) racialized students, faculty and staff which affect their sense of belonging, their representation in institutional practices and structures, their academic success, and their overall well-being in the classroom and beyond from recruitment through to graduation" (PACAR Interim Report p. 8).

This conclusion is supported by recommendations arising from campus-wide consultations, which revealed the need to radically welcome students from historically excluded and equity-deserving groups.

The structures of orientation as they currently exist perpetuate the persistence of traditions that no longer meet the needs of all students. Dismantle structures embedded in tradition that may be exclusionary, unwelcoming and unsupportive. An approach to radically welcoming students calls on StFX to change the ways in which they have traditionally welcomed new students to the university community, and advance new, innovative, equitable approach to ensure all students can flourish.

4 Transitions Models

The structure and content of orientation and transitions programs in higher education varies widely. To build an extended orientation and transitions program at StFX, it may be possible to leverage the strengths of our existing transitions strategies (orientation week, online transitions modules) and apply other complementary strategies to meet the transitional needs of diverse students and student groups.

Transition Strategy	Characteristics
First-Year Course	• Carry academic credit • Centered in the first-year curriculum • Include academic content and skills development. • Involve both faculty and student affairs professionals in all stages of program design and instruction. • Instructors are trained in basic methods of group facilitation and active learning pedagogies. • Instructors are paid or rewarded for their teaching. • Upper-level students are involved as peer leaders or co-facilitators. • Courses are evaluated on a regular basis, and results of this evaluation are made available to the entire campus community.
Orientation Week	• High-energy activities • Focused on familiarizing students with their new environment, facilitating connections with peers, acquiring new information.
Extended Orientation Program	• Non-credit program • May include outdoor recreation, experiential orientation programs to engage incoming students and help students build connections to the institution and their peers. • Provides ongoing support and opportunities for reflect on their university transition and gain exposure to co-curricular learning experiences
Learning Communities	• Upper-year and new students share learning strategies and provide informal emotional support for academic and social transitions
Summer Bridge Programs	• Non-credit programs • Focus on helping students adjust to university life • Focus on fostering relationships with faculty, peers and the institution, and the development of important university skills • Involve active learning strategies including demonstrations and hands-on activities, and group discussions. • May include academic content, and topics relating to coping, self-directed learning, critical thinking.

Online Transitions Programs/Modules	• Typically delivered asynchronously, self-paced • Improves access for transfer students, international students, graduate students, and distance learners by reducing geographic, scheduling and financial barriers to participation. • Available as an ongoing resource throughout the year. • Able to provide immediate feedback on student interaction, engage and learning. • Content ranges from academic information, course registration and introducing students to campus resources to preventing sexual violence, harm reduction, and help students manage their mental health, among other development topics. • Institutions differ on how they deliver content, with options including text, images, video, quizzes, interactive activities, etc.

For Discussion: What does StFX already do to support student orientation and transition? What experiences are students having in these programs? How can we elevate/enhance existing student orientation programs to better support transition for all students?

Case Example: First Year Course

UPEI: University 100 Course

University 100 is a unique and important program at the University of Prince Edward Island. With classes strategically capped at 25 students, University 100 provides an introduction to the University and equips students with key tools such as critical thinking, communication and research skills.

Nature and Goals of the Course

- Introduce 1st-year students to UPEI & university studies
- Develop study & research skills
- Enhance oral & written communication Encourage the growth of self-knowledge & self-discovery Develop an awareness of the University, past & present

Sample Topics Covered in University 100

- Setting goals: planning your semester and university career
- Managing your time and handling the transition between high school and university
- Exploring career opportunities/forming career plans and developing self-awareness
- Reading and studying: reading university textbooks, note-taking at lectures and finding the balance between class notes and textbooks
- Study skills and tips on taking tests
- Researching and writing: the writing process, conducting research, academic and creative writing

5 Proposed Extended Orientation Program for StFX

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks informing the development of the StFX Student Experience and Opportunity Plan, all programs, resources, and supports provided by StFX Student Services will be intentionally designed and grounded in the following evidence-informed frameworks to support wholistic student success and well-being.

Theory	Key Concepts	Alignment to Proposed Extended Orientation & Transitions Program
Cultivate a Flourishing Campus	Cultivate environments that optimize emotional, psychological and social well-being; Recognize and focus on the student strengths	Extended orientation program will support students' academic, intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge and skills development
Support Mental Health as a Continuum	Wellbeing exists on a spectrum; Integrate effective upstream, midstream, and downstream approaches to support wholistic student success	Extended orientation program will provide upstream intervention to support student well-being across the continuum of care through proactive, prevention education and mechanism for early identification of students in need of support.
Recognize and Respond to Social Determinants of Health	Apply an intersectional lens; Provide culturally relevant programs and services; Address the specific needs of diverse student populations	Students with similar characteristics (identity, background, interests) will have an opportunity to come together in community.
Promote Agency through Wholistic Student Engagement	Recognize relationship between academic success and quality of life outside the classroom; create personalized pathways to student success	Students will acquire academic, interpersonal and social knowledge and skills development
Harness a Developmental and Proactive Approach	Create facilitated and guided transitions; Focus on the first-year experience and intentionally scaffold student learning across all years of study.	The program will focus on frontloading essential knowledge and skills, and scaffolding student learning through the entire first-year experience.

Proposed Learning Outcomes

All Departments within StFX Student Services will intentionally cultivate student learning across the five factors of flourishing, allowing students to deepen their understanding of their personal strengths, and connecting these strengths to learning opportunities where they gain transferrable skills that will become the drivers for their future careers and lives.

By engaging in an extended orientation and transitions program at StFX, programs will encourage students to:

Be a(n)	By
Critical Thinker	evaluating resources, supports, services and programs that are available and how to access them
Future-Focused Planner	developing confidence in their ability to effectively navigate university and accomplish their goals
Adaptable Problem Solver	understanding university processes, policies, structures, expectations and community values and how to access services that support personal and academic goals
Community-Minded	demonstrating responsibility for their actions, self-reflection and learning how to interpret the effects their decisions on others.
Engaged Citizen	understanding and value the many facets of diversity found within the StFX community and local areas
Innovative Leader	evaluating individual strengths while defining their personal vision for their university experience and their futures.

For Discussion: What knowledge, skills and abilities do we want first-year StFX students to gain through an extended orientation and transitions program? What specific actions will we need to take to realize these priorities?

Case Examples: Extended Orientation Programs for Historically Excluded Students

Indigenous Students:

- Summer Indigenous Institute / Indigenous Foundations Program (Nipissing University)

Black Students:

- Black Excellence Orientation (UofT Mississauga)
- Black Student Orientation (UBC)

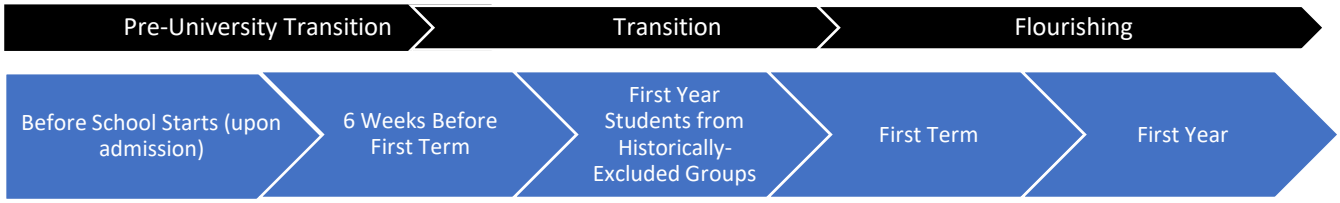
Students with Disabilities:

- Pre-University/Transitions Programs (York University)
- Moving Forward Summer Transitions Program (University of Toronto)
- SHIFT Programming (Ryerson University)

First-Generation Students:

- First-Generation Week (McGill University)
- Academic Success Program (Western University)

Proposed Program Structure



Before School Starts (upon admission)	6 Weeks Before First Term	First Year Students from Historically-Excluded Groups	First Term	First Year
Strengthen required academic skills	Navigate services and build community	Succeed in post-secondary	Access supports and apply impactful learning strategies	Determine career planning next steps
Transition Strategy				
Online Transitions Modules	Online Transitions Modules Summer Bridge Program Mentorship Program	Online Transitions Modules Summer Bridge Program Mentorship Program	Online Transitions Modules Orientation Week Extended Orientation Program First Year Course Mentorship Program Learning Communities	Online Transitions Modules Extended Orientation Program First Year Course Mentorship Program
Program Goals				
Understand university values and expectations Become acquainted with key university policies and processes. Strengthen academic skills to succeed in university life (ex. Xaverian Community Foundations modules (i.e., Safer Socializing @ X, Consent Education @ X, You Belong @ X)	Discover personal strengths Cultivate social networks based on program, interests and social identity Identify supports & services available and their purpose Learn important program-related information Experience diversity within the university and local communities	Cultivate connections in community (community building activities, student leadership opportunities, exposure to campus life) Experience diversity within the university and local communities (speakers, field experience, cultural and academic activities) Interact with professors and community members Acquire student success coaching, peer mentoring, personal well-being workshops	Introduction to academic learning strategies and skills Apply strategies for staying focused and motivated while supporting personal well-being *Scaffold intentional learning experiences related to personal and academic success and well-being (GBV, EDI-A; Substance Use) using a first-year experience framework/curriculum (residence education,	Navigate a career path, including exploring career opportunities/forming career plans and developing self-awareness Connect with career mentors for support and guidance

Design your StFX experience; get to know campus; potential leadership and mentorship experiences	Focused sessions (ex. navigate academic accommodations in post-secondary)	campus-wide programming) Connect with upper year peer mentors

For Discussion: Are there aspects of the sample program provided that would help advance our approach to extended student orientation and transition? Are there other elements of the design, development and implementation of an extended orientation and transitions program that we need to consider?

For Discussion: What could be the work of StFX Student Services in supporting this program? What actions will require extensive collaboration with others?

Sample Supporting Actions

To operationalize the priorities identified above, we can start to identify SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) actions. The following provides some sample actions StFX could consider in order to advance the priorities identified above (for consideration and discussion):

Priority 2	SAMPLE ACTIONS
Create an Extended Orientation and Transitions program by frontloading resources, supports and programs in first year and intentionally scaffolding student learning and engagement as part of an immersive first-year learning experience.	1. Create a New Student Experience Framework that maps intentional co-curricular student engagement and learning opportunities throughout the entire first-year experience.
	2. Develop online modules for parents/supporters to be empowered to support their student in their transition to university and throughout their first-year experience.
	3. Establish a transition year program to support wholistic student success (both pre-entrance and during first-year) including formal (e.g. camps and courses) and informal supports (e.g., mentorship). Areas of focus will include the development of a Summer Bridge Program focused on academic orientation, community connections, strengths assessment, and connections to local communities with a particular focus on supporting transition for students from historically-excluded groups.
	4. Develop high-quality co-curricular learning experiences and transitions programming for off-campus, mature, distance learning, transfer students, and student athletes that enrich their student experience.

	5. Coordinate a Winter transitions program to welcome new students arriving in January, and re-orient all first-year students to the programs, services and supports provided by StFX.
	6. Continue partnership between StFX Student Services and Graduate Studies to enhance understanding of the specific needs of graduate and distance learning students and deepen an understanding of their transitional needs.
	7. Leverage the “Being Xaverian” campaign as an opportunity to collect and share stories of diverse student experiences at StFX.
	8. Create an online web platform for StFX students (undergraduate, graduate, full-time or part-time) to share their stories, guided by a content strategy based in student flourishing.

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