

Coming Together During COVID

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Increasing Opportunity to Create Community Among First-Year WPI Students

Recommendations Guide

Project Overview

Higher education institutions have experienced drastic changes due to safety and health guidelines designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19. We analyzed how these guidelines have affected the first-year student experience at WPI. We conducted focus groups with first-year students and community advisors, identified key findings, and distributed surveys to gauge interest on proposed recommendations. We found that the safety guidelines have limited spontaneous social interactions and that students find non-academic interactions valuable to the college experience. We recommend increasing opportunities to interact such as major-specific events, cross-dorm activities, and creating casual online spaces to connect.

Recommendations Matrix

Recommendation	Description	Where it Fits
Student Matchmaking	Use a preference survey to match students with similar interests	Can be adopted by different offices or organizations
Major Specific Events	Mentorship pairings, online major fairs, major related discussion channels	Undergraduate Studies Office Academic Advising Office Major Departments
Cross-Dorm Activities/Events	Game shows, video games, trivia, and peer matching	Insight Program Student Activities Office
WPI Discord Server	Discord server with various channels for topics and organizations	Student Activities Office

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Student Matchmaking

Overview

Students are lacking ways to connect with new people on campus, Student matchmaking gives students the interaction they are craving. Similar to speed dating, the idea is to meet up with another student who you have never met before and have a meaningful conversation with that person. We believe this activity could be organized and run by senior community advisors in conjunction with the Insight Program.



Steps for Implementation

1. Spread word of event to first-year students
2. Create a sign-up form that includes a short preference survey
3. Upon completion of the survey, send automated email to participants containing a zoom link and password.
4. Match students according to the preference survey. Each student should be matched with 5 other students.
5. At the event, split participants into breakout rooms with their first matches.
6. After 8 minutes, recall students and move them into new breakout rooms with new students.
7. After students have met with 5 other students, end the event and distribute follow up surveys to participants.

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Major Specific Events

Mentorship Pairing



Overview

First-year students have struggled to connect with others in their online classes. A mentorship program that pairs first-year students and upperclassmen within their major would encourage networking for first-year students, and may help them make up for lost social and academic interactions. The ongoing sophomore mentorship program, organized by the Undergraduate Studies Office could be expanded to include first-year students.

Steps for Implementation

1. Distribute a survey to first-year students and upperclassmen to gauge interest in being a mentor / mentee.
 - a. Determine students' major and any specific interests within their field.
2. Match each first-year student with an upperclassmen of the same major.
3. Connect each pairing via email.
 - a. In the email, provide a list of suggestions for the mentorship to encourage a beneficial relationship.

Major Fair

Overview

An online major fair in which first-year students could speak with professors or upperclassmen in different departments would allow first-year students to explore their own or various majors as well as different paths or research interests. Additionally, it could help freshmen build a network with other first-year students, upperclassmen, and professors in their majors which may help them compensate for the peer and professor interactions lost in online classes.



Steps for Implementation

1. Reach out to department heads of each major.
 - a. Inform them of the fair.
 - b. Ask that forward the information to their student body in order to get a handful of student presenters from each major.
 - c. Ask that they also refer interested faculty members willing to give a 10 minute presentation about their work at the online fair.
2. Inform the first-year student body about the fair
3. Host the event
 - a. Each major would have a scheduled time and a respective Zoom meeting ID, allowing students to explore more than one major.
 - b. Make the schedule and meeting links visible in the email to students.
 - c. Encourage student networking by instructing faculty to use breakout rooms on the calls with students.

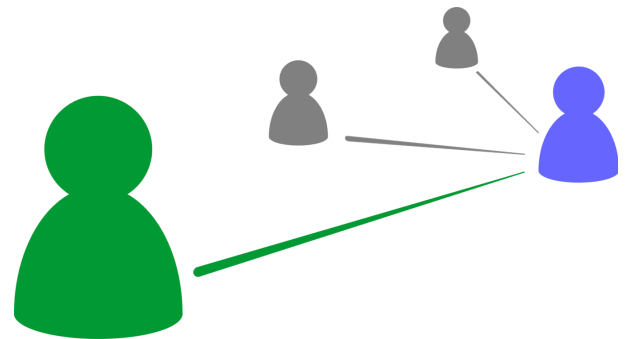
Peer Matching

Overview

First-year students are looking for connections and ways to make up for the interactions that are not able to be replicated in online classes. A peer matching program for students of the same major could supplement these interactions and strengthen students' social and academic network.

Steps for Implementation

1. Distribute an interest survey to first-year students.
 - a. Determine students' majors, interests, and preference to interact in person or online.
2. Match students with similar responses.
3. Notify peers of their matches via email.
 - a. In email, also include suggestions for ways students could interact.



Impact

Major-specific online events, like the ones outlined above, would guide students through the challenges of their first year. Having an upperclassman mentor, the opportunity to explore their major, and being matched with a peer would help first-year students to establish a healthy social and academic network of connections.

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Cross-Dorm Activities

Overview

First-year students are eager for opportunities to meet people outside of their bubble and are in favor of participating in cross-dorm activities. Activities such as trivia, video games, game show competitions, and peer matching can be implemented. We believe each of the recommendations fit under the jurisdiction of the Student Activities Office or the Insight Program



Steps for Implementation

1. Identify sponsoring organization
2. Choose activity and organize logistics
 - a. Organize event on online application or create personal questions via powerpoint or similar platform
3. Promote through CAs
 - a. Encourage CAs to communicate the activity to their students and to start forming teams
4. Form teams and organize bracket
5. Host event

Impact

Despite being online, these events would allow students to engage with new people, participate in activities with the community, and create new networks and outlets of support. It will also give students a greater sense of the broader WPI community and help them integrate.

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Discord Server

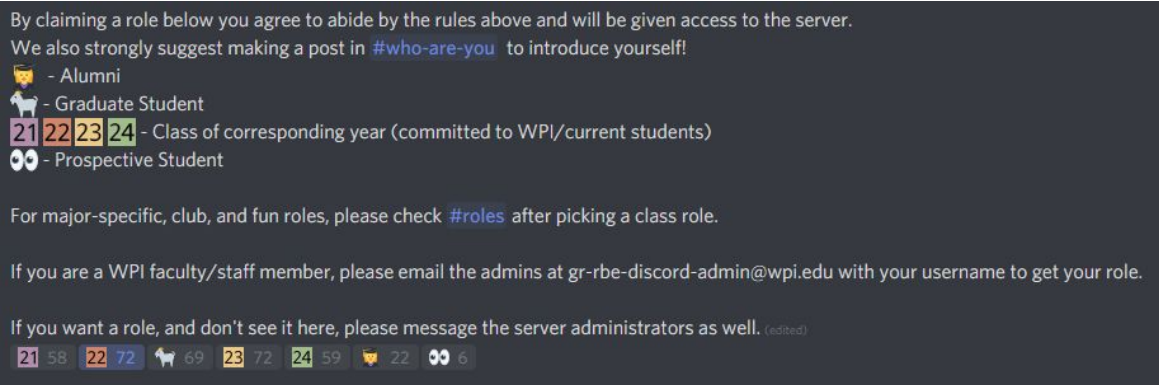
Overview

Based on feedback from students we have found Discord to be a popular tool for first-year students to connect with each other. The RBE major has a Discord server which can act as a good example of how a Discord server can be successfully implemented in an academic/school setting. Many of these guidelines are based on the practices of that server. More general information about Discord can be found on their website, discord.com.



Guidelines for Implementation

We recommend that the server include a few main chat rooms. When students first join the server, they should be restricted to a read-only channel which includes all of the rules for the server. At the end of the list of rules, there could be some way that students could indicate their year. Choosing a role would also mean that they agreed to the server's rules, and would receive access to the other main channels after choosing a role. Shown below is what the RBE Discord's role selection looks like. There are different Discord emotes for each of the roles, and by using one of those emotes as a reaction, new students to the server indicate what year they are.



The RBE Discord's Basic Role Selection

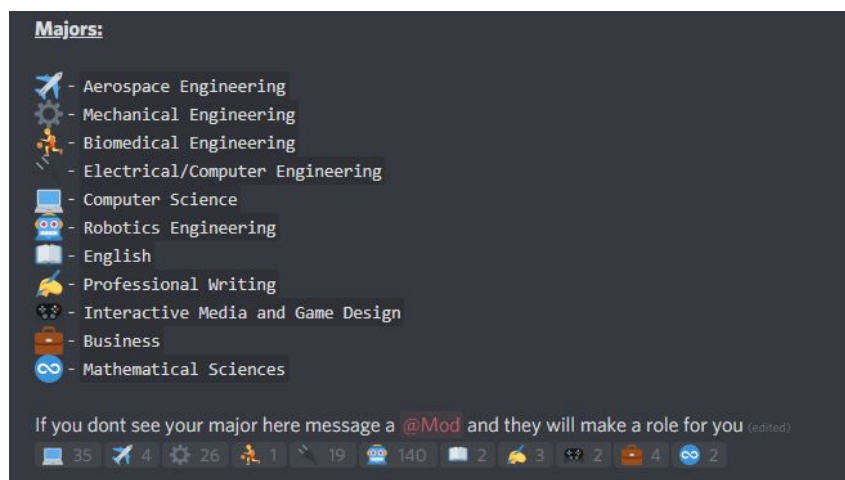
There will also need to be few users who are granted mod powers to ensure that students in the server are following the rules.

Channel Ideas

We will now discuss some possible chat/voice channel ideas for a Discord server for students.

Additional Role Selection:

- This channel would be a read-only channel where students could react to messages to get even more roles
- These roles could be anything ranging from their Major to what hobbies they are interested in



Additional Roles in the RBE Discord

Server Announcements:

- This channel would be a place where mods or club presidents would be able to make posts about different events that might be going on or important announcements for the general student body

Server Feedback:

- This channel would be used as a place where students could provide feedback on how they thought the server was being run and any complaints or suggestions they had for how to improve the server for all

General Channel:

- Every Discord server has one of these. This channel would be where most of the general discussion would take place

Major/Club Specific Channels:

- These channels would be places where students could ask about things related to a specific major or club
- Ideally, there would be a different channel for each major and each club. To avoid too much clutter, club and major channels would start off hidden, and only be accessible to students who selected additional roles indicating that they were interested in specific majors/clubs

Meetups:

- This is a channel where students could try and find others who might be interested in meeting somewhere in-person

Miscellaneous/Fun Channels:

- These channels would be for non-school related activities such as watching sports, playing video games, memes, or discussions about TV shows or movies
- There could be a text channels where students could discuss sports and voice channels as well where students could use the Discord streaming feature to all watch a sports game together while all in a call

- There could also be gaming channels with different voice channels so students looking to find others to play with could post in the corresponding channel

Impact

Having a community Discord server will allow first-year students to more easily find and connect with other first-year students. It would also provide a platform where first-year students could find others who had the same interests and ask upperclassmen for advice on how to best proceed with their college career. Finally, the server would also act as a virtual gathering place where students could join a voice channel with each other and do activities like playing games or watching sports with each other.