

Retention and Connection: Analyzing the Impact of New Student Programs' Small Group Experience on Student Success during Orientation

New Student Programs, The Student Experience
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Introduction

The opt-in small group experience during orientation is a fundamental segment of incoming students' Welcome Week. Designed to be welcoming communities within the broader campus setting, small groups are led by Orientation Leaders and help students navigate the initial complexities of university life through interactive discussions and engaging activities explicitly tailored for Syracuse University. The overall goal is to ensure new students feel a sense of belonging at Syracuse University through wayfinding, building connection and mentorship. Our assessment connects student retention rates of those who participated in small groups vs. those who did not, and the impact(s) on student success that the small group curriculum has on participants, as well as the experiences of Orientation Leaders having facilitated the small group curriculum.

Small Group Structure

Small Group "Themes"	BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, BIPOC/LGTBQIA+, Out-of-State, Women in STEM, Military-Connected, Commuter, First-Generation, Transfer, and 35+ "General" Small Groups
Small Group Meeting 1	Icebreaker/community builder, establish group communication plan, Welcome Week schedule review.
Small Group Meeting 2	Icebreaker, Syracuse University Hotspots (studying, food, resources), determine a meet-up time for the evening's campus-wide social.
Small Group Meeting 3	Inclusion and Belonging, Hopes and Fears, Wrap-up



"Coming to a large university basically knowing no one, this small group helped make a large change not feel so big. Without small groups, I would definitely have a totally different experience."



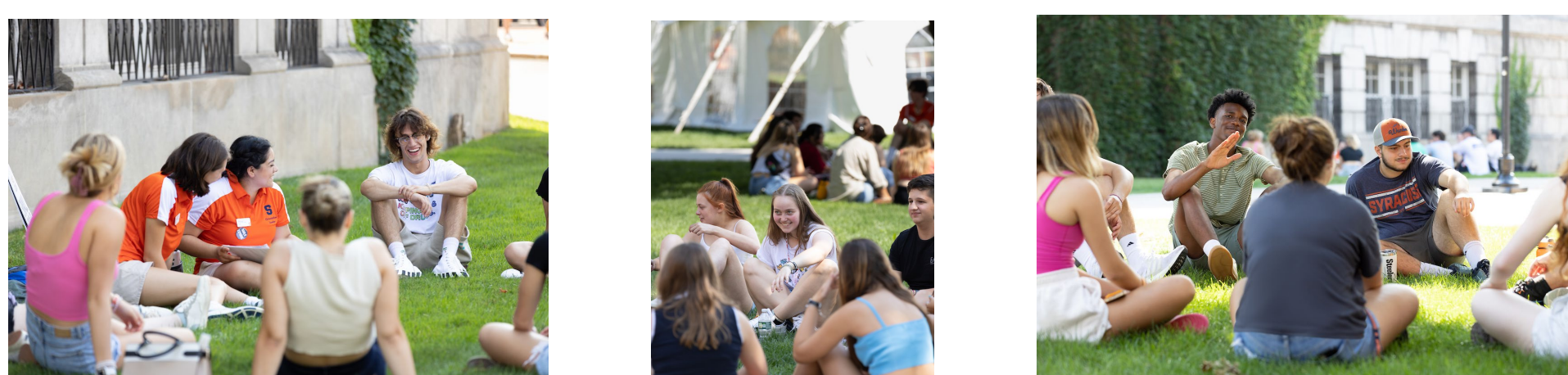
"If I had not attended, I would not have met two of my closest friends now and I would not have had the opportunity to work through some of the fears and anxieties I had going into college."

"I think the small groups should be more encouraged to participate in. I didn't realize the small groups would be the only real college orientation opportunity I would get. I think my experience at Syracuse would've started a lot smoother and I would've felt less lonely in my first semester."

Assessment Strategies

- Direct Measures: Orientation Leader observations/interactions, retention data.
- Indirect Measures: Assessment surveys, listening sessions, interviews

All facilitated by Student Assessment Intern in Spring 2024.



Retention Rates of FY Students

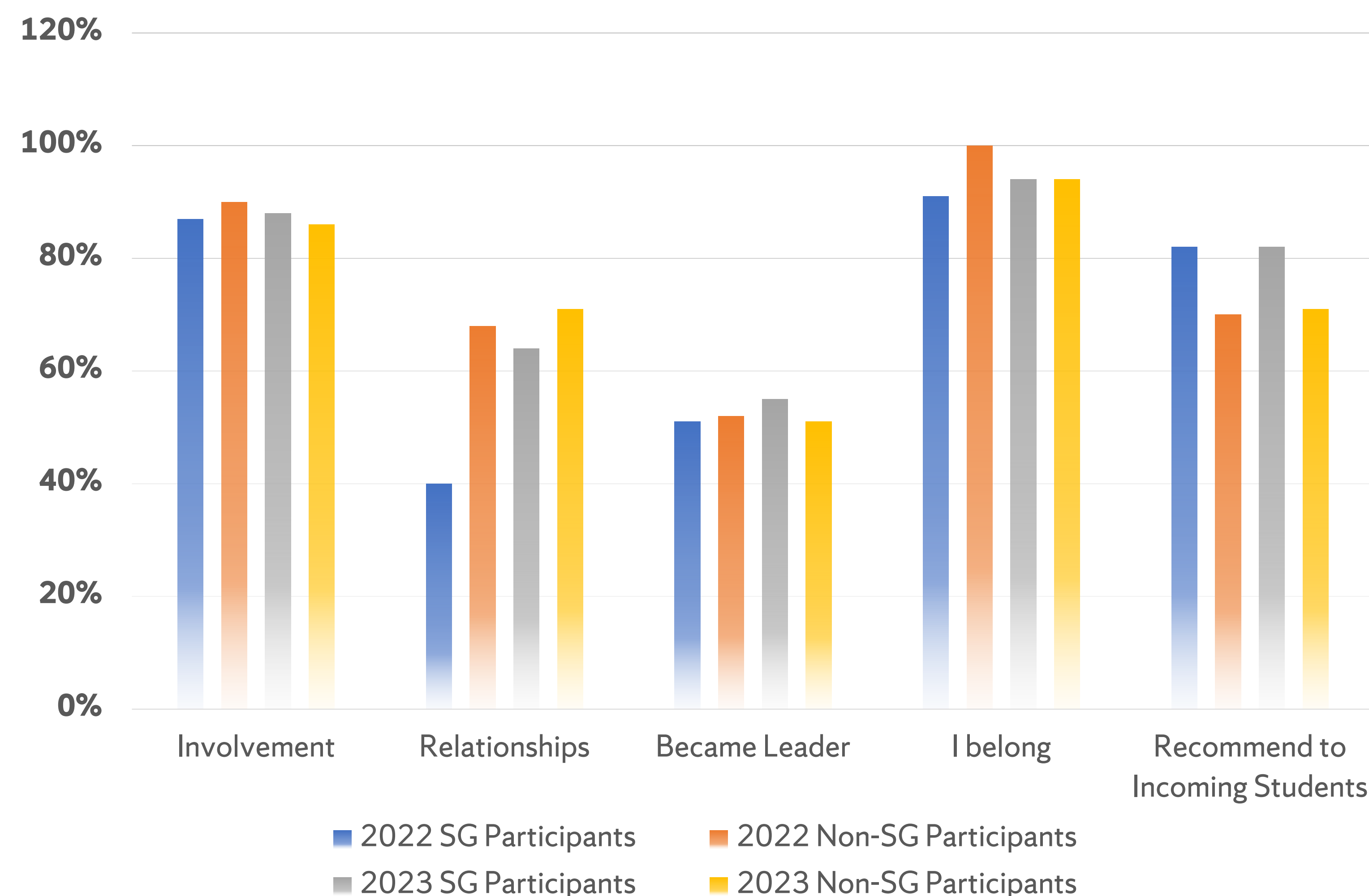


1. Numbers are based on student registrations for Welcome Week and not reflective of the entire entering class. This represents the assessment samples as well.

Orientation Leader Observations and Trends

- **On Peer Interaction and Lasting Relationships:** Students frequently formed enduring friendships during orientation, visible through ongoing social interactions both on campus and online.
- **On Participants Becoming Leaders:** A notable proportion of small group members actively participated in various campus roles, such as tour guides, student senators, and Orientation Leaders, indicating a deep engagement with campus life. Several students expressed interest in becoming Orientation Leaders, reflecting the positive influence and inspirational impact of their small group experiences.
- **Guidance and Independence:** There was an initial surge in requests for help with campus resources that decreased over time, suggesting that small groups effectively supported students in becoming more independent and acquainted with university facilities.
- **Gratitude and Satisfaction:** Orientation Leaders regularly received appreciative feedback from group members, through texts and personal interactions, highlighting the significant sense of belonging and satisfaction fostered by these groups.

Orientation Impact



Next Steps and Recommendations

- **Enhance Relationship Dynamics:** Include a greater focus on interactive and collaborative activities within small groups and the orientation program. Such initiatives should foster community, inclusion and belonging, enabling new students to form meaningful connections that could positively impact their academic journey and social well-being.
- **Commit to a Longitudinal Research Approach:** A comprehensive long-term study should be launched, beginning with the Summer Orientation Pilot in 2024. This study would track retention and success over several years to more accurately assess the impact of the orientation program on student persistence and performance. Our retention data does not indicate a correlation between student retention and small group participation.
- **Diversify Research Demographics:** To ensure our findings are reflective of the entire student body, future research should include a more diverse and larger sample of students. This approach will allow us to examine the effects of orientation across various student populations and provide a more generalizable understanding of its impact.
- **Improve Program Accessibility and Awareness:** Given the high rate of recommendations from past participants, we must work to increase the program's profile so that all incoming students are aware of its benefits. Ensuring that the small groups are accessible to everyone, regardless of their background or personal circumstances, is also critical.
- **Establish a System for Regular Feedback:** By instituting a regular feedback mechanism, orientation and the small groups program can be dynamically refined and adjusted in response to student experiences and suggestions. This continuous improvement process is vital for maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of the program.