TEAM BUILDING AND COHORT DEVELOPMENT

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An important component to managing a research program is managing/coordinating relationships. Part of your program management plan should include strategies that will help students build strong relationships with their research mentors and their peers. Plan to incorporate team building activities early on and throughout your program. Getting students to feel comfortable in their new relationships with peers can make the summer go much more smoothly and be more enjoyable for all involved.

➡ Why do team building?

Team building activities help to build a strong cohort that will help build a stronger and resilient program. A tight cohort will be supportive among its members. Team building can also lead to more engaged students and therefore result in more effective outcomes and more meaningful research experience.

When students connect with each other at the start of the summer, they feel more comfortable, can learn better, and be more productive. A strong cohort can also provide support to help students deal with challenges in their research or other aspects of the REU. Having a tight cohort can mean a much easier load for the program manager or PI, because the students feel more included, happier, and as a result are more productive.

The following are some activities that help students to connect with each other more quickly and help them to prepare for the internship.

➡ **Pre-program Cohort Building**

Pre-program activities help students "break the ice" and can help decrease the stress that comes with starting a new program and meeting new people.

Personal Introductions

When first introducing the cohort to each other, consider using the What/Who format (*Knowles, 1975*). What is the typical stuff of introductions: I am a <year> <major> student at <college/university>. I am from <city/state/territory>. What is something unique about yourself that you would like others to know about you. This could include hobbies or any other defining characteristic.

REU director Daphne LaDue has been using this since first hearing about it at a class on Adult Learners. She reports, "It's amazing the connections that happen early on. This activity spurs connections on social media and early formation of plans to do various shared activities over the summer."

Question of the Week

This activity helps to build connections between students regardless of whether your program will be running on site or remotely. REU managers rated this activity highly.

1. Get students on to an app like Slack or GroupMe at least one month beforehand
2. Ask a question every Sunday to the group
3. Start with impersonal questions initially, as they are just getting to know each other
4. Examples include:
   - What is your favorite kind of food?
   - Post a photo from outdoors near where you live.
   - What is your favorite time of day?
   - What is your school doing in terms of teaching online vs in person?

One REU manager, Frank Marsik, wrote: "I really believe that using SLACK to build community during the weeks leading up to our program start helped. When we gathered on Tuesday, it certainly seemed like old friends getting together, rather than meeting people for the first time."

Small Zoom Meetings

Meeting one-on-one or in small groups ahead of the program can be highly effective for building trust and connection early on. Some configurations could look like this:

» Meet each student alone for 30 - 45 minutes to hear their concerns and get to know them and their circumstances.

» Meet with three or four students for an hour to introduce yourselves to each other and learn about their passions. Send out a Doodle Poll with times, and then email the students who can attend certain times. This can be done on short notice, e.g., one day.

» If time allows, have a full group meeting before the program starts. Use this opportunity to practice on Zoom together, review etiquette for online meetings (mute the mic, no eating, avoid sitting in front of a window), and get a feel for what the first day will be like.

Compile Biographies

Develop a document to help get to know each other before the REU begins, and to distribute to guest speakers and mentors. This is a good asynchronous first "team building" activity.

1. Give students a template of how to write a mini-autobiography, as well as a few examples.
2. Ask them to submit it before the first introductory meeting, which is facilitated online in advance, even for on-site programs.
3. Ask for a photo of them.
4. Bring everyone's bios together and distribute the package.

Topics might include:

» Name, location, home institution, field of study, and interest
» What is your passion in relation to this field (e.g., marine mammal behavior, diving)
» How you spend your spare time (e.g., any volunteering activities, work, interests)

Ice-breaker/Team-building Activities

There are many easy and fun ice-breaker activities that take no preparation but do a great job of helping students to connect and feel more comfortable in the group. See some examples below:

> » [The Sort and Mingle Game](#)
> » [Finding-Favorites Team-builder Activity](#)

Two Truths and a Wish

Have each participant think of two truths and a wish about themselves. Have them take turns presenting these and having the others guess which one is a lie. The person who guesses it correctly gets to go next or gets to pick the next person.

> » I can prepare sushi
> » I am the first person in my family to go to college
> » I am a DJ

This game allows people to get to know each other while having fun. Have the students prepare statements in advance if you can. "This is a particularly good one for getting folks talking." - Joanna York, REU manager.

➡️ Program Cohort Building

Team building activities throughout the program can be strategically implemented for different reasons. Some are appropriate to continue to foster strong cohort relationships. However, you should consider implementing skill-building activities that will both grow relationships and teach students new skills (e.g., project planning or map making activities).

Pushpin Map - Where in the World activity

This activity uses Zoom's annotate functions but could be hosted in Poll Everywhere or other interactive platforms. Ask students to place a "pushpin" on a map slide in screen share mode. On Zoom this can be done with a "stamp" (part of their annotate toolbox). Ask students to respond to a couple of questions:

> » Where were they born?
> » Where are they from?
> » Where would you like to go?

This activity will allow students to practice using Zoom, and they will need some clear directions.

Note: Zoom on some tablets does not offer the stamp-annotate function, but you could augment with other annotate tools.

Small Group Discussions

Create opportunities for students to meet in small groups for discussions. Discussion topics can range from informal or pop culture topics, to current events, or even to solve small challenges that you set for each group. The following is a short list of discussion topics, but the possibilities are endless.

> » What Netflix shows have you binge-watched during COVID-19?
> » Guesses on when the first named hurricane in the North Atlantic Ocean will be this year. Note their responses so we can see who is closest later.
> » Discuss where their first trip will be when they can travel again.
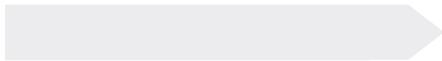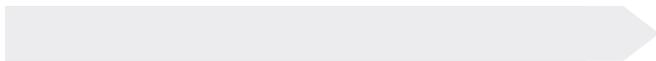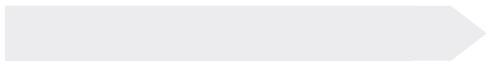
"This activity was actually suggested by my 2020 cohort," reports REU director Daphne LaDue. "The virtual nature of our program that year made it far more difficult for students to learn about each others' research except during practice presentations when everyone was nervous. They felt this would have benefitted them in many ways beyond just learning about science. They suggested it would be personally motivating (e.g., to accomplish more) and result in making connections that would help with both understanding topics and with coding."

Esri GIS Story Mapping and Fun Share

This activity emphasizes place and culture, while using Esri GIS Story Mapping to provide training in creating story maps. Using Esri Story Maps, ask students to "map their place" and share back with their group regularly (during weekly group meetings). Encourage participants to show a photo, a video, or their story map in progress.

You can provide participants with GoPro cameras or GPS units to make this activity more interactive. However, you don't need to do this if the costs are not within your budget. If you decide to provide equipment, make sure you order these in advance. Participants might share things they like to do (making a carved mask, a beaded graduation hat!), things about their culture, weekend excursions, pictures of their families, their pets (and videos from their pets wearing go-pros!).

Building Deeper Connections

Don't shy away from this very effective activity! It facilitates deeper connections between pairs of students. Students sometimes report this as being the most profound part of their experience.

  » [Meaningful Conversations Activity](#)

Encouraging Social Events

When cohorts are in person, encourage them to consider doing one thing each week as a whole group. Build expectations that while they may not all become the best of friends, they are an important support for each other. Give them ideas.

» For in-person programs, one pair of students could host a potluck dinner each week such as spaghetti.
» For online programs, they could play online games like Skibble.io (like Pictionary), host a cook-together evening, or play games like JackBox on Steam.
» Have "lunch time" on Zoom when everyone can hang out and eat together if they like. Choose a time that works for all of the time zones!

➡ Handbooks for the Students

Post-program activities help keep students engaged once the program ends. While post-program engagement is valuable to both the students and the program's ongoing impact, it is often challenging for program managers to put into practice because of other demands. A good post-program plan will help make this component manageable.

Alumni Notifications

Create an alumni email list that you send notifications about ongoing opportunities, news about others in their cohorts (such as graduation), or to check in just for fun. Create a schedule that allows you to plan the topics you want to share with students.

Year-round Career Talks

Schedule regular (e.g., quarterly) informal meetings where you invite professionals from diverse professional backgrounds to share about their career experiences. Guest speakers can be academic, industry professionals, or even former interns! Themes can revolve around career pathways, including the grad school application cycle. This activity provides career information and networking opportunities for students that they often lack in regular university courses.

REU Family Time

Host a monthly or quarterly Zoom meeting and invite all alumni to attend. Providing support over the long term is highly valued by these young scientists particularly during a pandemic. This community-building also helps with building a professional network amongst the alumni, which leads to sharing of scholarship and job opportunities, providing feedback to each other on application materials, and giving inspiration and encouragement.

Further Reading

Knowles, M., 1975: Self-Directed Learning: A Guide for Learners and Teachers. Globe Fearon, 135 pp.