

Students Don't Have It All Figured Out, And That's OK. This Program Is Here To Help.

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Illustration by Alexandra Angelich, University Communications

The University of Virginia is expanding a popular program just in time for the fall semester, offering up to 500 first-year and transfer students a spot in “Hoo’s Connected,” which teaches healthy relationship-building skills designed to launch a thriving college experience.

Based in psychology, Hoo’s Connected will draw together groups of up to a dozen students who will meet weekly to discuss ways to create healthy peer networks.

Program Director Alison Nagel says it’s a terrific way for new Wahoos to demystify the college experience and help participants realize they are more alike than they realize. Everyone is doing this for the first time, she said.

Nagel holds two UVA degrees, a B.A. in psychology and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, making her a “Double Hoo.” She remembers when she first arrived on Grounds as a first-year student. A Charlottesville native, she knew she had a leg up because she already knew friends who were also new students.



Alison Nagel is the new program director of Hoo's Connected. (Photo by Dan Addison, University Communications)

“Even with every kind of privilege coming into that situation, I still found it really challenging to make meaningful relationships,” she said. “I just remember this sense of ‘Nobody really knows the real me. Like, are we all pretending or am I the only one that’s pretending?’”

Nagel said it took a while for that sensation to shake off enough that she felt she really could find her people and her place at UVA. “I think being able to fast track that is super important, especially when you’re looking at so many diverse experiences of people, all kind of getting thrown into the same starting point, but that really meaning different things for different folks,” she said.

Students will meet with their groups and upperclass facilitators for about eight or nine weeks in either the fall or spring semesters, and will discuss things like the “masks” they put on to hide their real feelings, be it the class clown, the jock or the cynic.

In a Jefferson Trust-funded pilot program last year, students were asked how often they use their metaphoric masks and asked to raise their hands if they don a certain mask. Looking around the room, it soon became apparent that masking is not unique. It’s a way to level the playing field and show that everyone is, to a certain extent, trying on personalities instead of being genuine, said Joseph Allen, who founded Hoo’s Connected.

(https://returntogrounds.virginia.edu?utm_source=InlineAd&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=Fall2020)



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“We got just overwhelmingly positive feedback,” Allen, the Hugh Kelly Professor of Psychology, said. “We didn’t do any formal, random assignment evaluation, but the qualitative feedback we got was just incredibly positive.”

Here are some of those anonymous observations:

“Before, I felt like a random fish in the sea, but now I feel like a specific fish in the sea.”

“College students love to skip stuff, and there’s a reason why we all come every week to this optional thing and this room is always full.”

“It really helped me to bring the topics we talked about to conversations with friends.”

Allen said in today’s COVID-19 environment, Hoo’s Connected provides a way for students to be socially connected, whether or not physically connected, and that his team successfully ran a half-virtual group this spring. Funded by a grant from the offices of the President and of the Provost, the goal is to eventually expand Hoo’s Connected to serve the majority of incoming first-year students.

Given the racial tensions that are gripping the country, Hoo’s Connected can play a vital role in making sure everyone feels welcomed and included as new students at UVA.

“It’s something that we spend a tremendous amount of time thinking about and really trying to do our best, understanding that our best is not enough,” Nagel said. “And viewing the idea of facilitating meaningful connections and giving people the space to really know and see one another, that that is an important part of a of a broader process.

“We are hoping we’re tackling one tiny little drop in the sea of pain and injustice and inequality,” she continued. “We know that it’s not the whole story. You know, it’s certainly not the whole solution.”

A decision on whether to hold sessions in-person or virtually will be made later in the summer.

Allen said the great thing about Hoo’s Connected is it doesn’t require any preparation. If held in person, students are asked to just show up and enjoy some free food and interesting

conversations.

Students can begin enrolling **now** (<http://hoosconnecteduva.com/signup/>) .

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