HANOVER RESEARCH

BEST PRACTICES

Virtual Admissions

In this report, Hanover reviews recommendations and presents case studies of approaches to online admissions practices and events.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS

Institutions are increasing use of existing virtual campus tours, and moving visits and orientations online using video conferencing and live chat.

A number of institutions implemented virtual tours several years prior as a backup option to on-campus visits. Given restrictions on campus visits, institutions are directing prospects to these alternatives. According to Inside Higher Ed, attendance at these virtual tours has expanded significantly, with nearly 1.4 million views of YouVisit-produced campus tours in March and April. These tours can be accessed on the institution's website, but some institutions such as Iowa State University and University of Oregon also maintain VR mobile apps for these tours; University of Oregon goes an extra step and mails out branded cardboard headsets prospects can mount their smartphone into for the VR tour. More recently, campus visit events and orientations have moved online through webinars and live chats.

The best virtual events emphasize the human element, flexibility, the use of multiple channels and media types, and the ability to integrate virtual channels.

Recommendations from enrollment managers highlight the importance of personalization and a human element where possible, including the use of video recordings and video in webinars to put a "face" on virtual admissions; institutions bring in a range of administrators, faculty, current students, and alumni for online visits/orientations to connect with students in chat and Q&A. Institutions also use student-authored social media and video content to create a more student-focused feeling of connection to campus. Flexibility is important in response to COVID-19 related disruption, both on a wider scale (e.g., changing the admissions calendar) and in responding to individual student and family needs. To reach the widest range of prospects, institutions should use both synchronous and asynchronous approaches, incorporate video and text, and leverage several communication channels such as social media, email, and phone calls. A benefit to moving these events online is the potential ease for integrating media and interactions—events can be cross-promoted, and contact information for prospects can guide them through the pipeline and remind them of scheduled events.

Online learning organizations have assessment guidelines for the quality of online services, including admissions.

As programs and services have migrated online over the years, organizations like the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) offer published guidelines and rubrics to assess the quality of online service offerings. Institutions without established robust online services can reference these as a baseline to ensure central student needs are met.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS

Rather than try to replicate campus events, institutions should focus on the desired takeaways and experiences at the heart of their admissions events and use online tools to achieve them.

Virtual event developers note that online versions of events will not be the same as on-campus interactions. A Hofstra University admissions officer notes in a New York Times article that "the hardest thing to recreate is what we call that 'wow' moment." Virtual tools may not exactly recreate these sorts of moments. Rather than try to perfectly recreate the campus experience, institutions should consider the benefits and restrictions of online tools to meet the same goals and take advantage of unique capabilities in the virtual environment. Enrollment management experts recommend using the "so what?" approach to admissions events. Break down the purpose, desired experience, and outcome students and parents should have in each component of the event. After identifying the core of each event or interaction, consider how online tools can be used to achieve it.

Institutions participate in large-scale virtual admissions events coordinated by third parties.

Some third-party organizations offer online multi-college information sessions or admissions fairs, such as Strive for College's Virtual College Exploration Week or the American Dental Education Association's GoDental Virtual Fair. Institutional representatives can participate in webinars and live chats planned and managed by external partners for an additional outreach opportunity.

Student-developed social media and student admissions representatives can serve to foster the human connection with an institution and personalize virtual campus tours.

A number of institutions maintain admissions-specific social media accounts and blogs; as part of these, institutions incorporate student-authored content such as "takeovers" where a selected student documents their day on campus, Snapchat campus tours from a student perspective, and campus life videos. These student-centered approaches can help reinforce the experience of campus culture, put an individual 'face' on admissions content or events, and serve as an alternate view to formal virtual campus tours. Virtual events such as Q&A sessions and webinars can also incorporate student admissions representatives who can answer questions from the student perspective and foster a personal connection between prospective and current students.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMON APPROACHES

TRANSLATING ADMISSIONS ONLINE

When seeking to move engagements online, consider the purpose, desired experience, and outcome of the interaction to determine what virtual functions are needed. Then, maintain personalization and the human element.

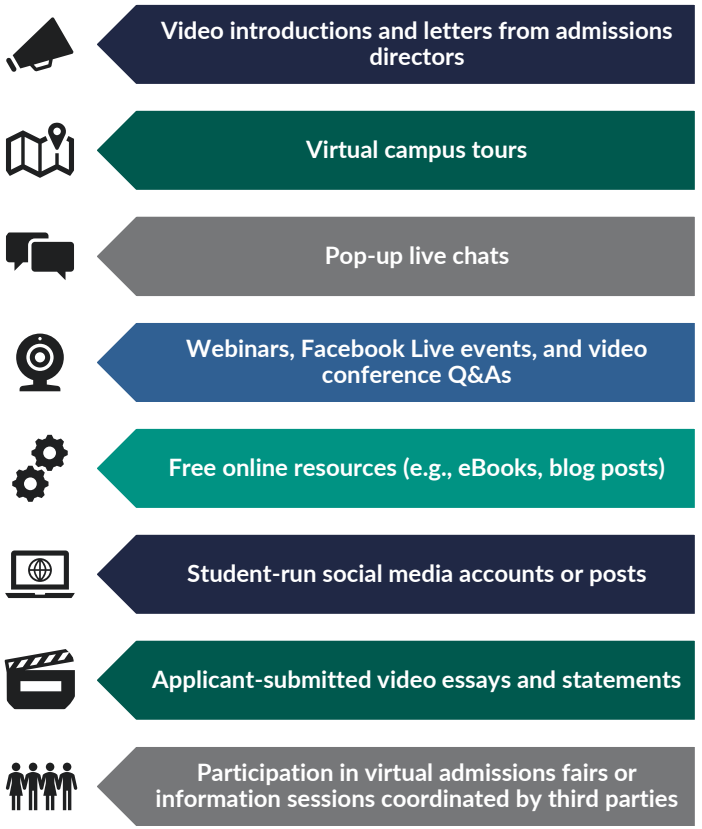
The Enrollment Management Association (EMA) recommends reviewing the admissions process and applying the "so what" test; i.e., ask leadership and admissions personnel "So what does each stage actually achieve? What is the outcome we want our dream families to experience at each moment in time?" Determining the precise nature and benefits of each admissions interaction should guide what virtual tools to use.

NYU's senior vice president for enrollment management provides several high-level tips for translating admissions and enrollment into virtual engagements:

- Make the virtual personal – in addition to general admissions information and online events, NYU also holds "individual and small meetings with students, faculty, deans and alumni in the NYU community"
- Provide structure, consistency, and compassion – NYU maintains its standard schedule for decisions, deposit deadlines, and registration to provide consistency; however, the institution is willing to be flexible for individual families who cannot meet the schedule or require extra assistance
- Be boldly creative – find "creative ways to bring [your] campus to each student [you] admit," by leveraging media and multiple methods of online interaction between prospects, admitted students, and parents and members of the campus community

COMMON STRATEGIES

Many institutions already leverage online tools and approaches such as the Common Application and social media. Key solutions either already in place at, or being adopted following COVID by, institutions include:



Source: Enrollment Management Association, Chronicle of Higher Education, BizEd, Strive Scan

BEST PRACTICES FOR VIRTUAL ADMISSION EVENTS

The Enrollment Management Association defines several broad best practices for virtual admission events, including:

CREATE A HUB

Provide a central location for all resources and events. This is typically the existing admissions website, but sub-pages for different groups (e.g., transfer students) or virtual resources may be a useful way to organize; COVID-specific resource and news pages can direct prospects and admitted students to virtual events and online resources. Multiple online tools and resources can also be grouped together in a single hub; for instance, Montgomery County Community College System centralizes admissions with other online resources, providing "an online one-stop shop for admissions, registration and financial aid."

USE A VARIETY OF CONTENT

Incorporate a mix of delivery methods and types of content. Consider using a combination of asynchronous (e.g., pre-recorded videos, self-directed virtual campus tours) and synchronous (e.g., webinars, live online Q&As) delivery. As part of marketing to prospective students, also leverage inbound marketing via public-facing content such as resources for parents or general COVID resources. As a unique example, Penn developed an open online course on "How to Apply for College." Baylor University allows high school students to take online courses in summer. Personal interactions are also recommended (e.g., phone calls, video voicemail, care packages).

BE FLEXIBLE WHERE POSSIBLE

A range of content and events will help with this, but be open to accommodating individuals. Flexibility may be through overall schedule or policy adjustments, as well as listening and responding to individual student and family needs or concerns.

PUT A HUMAN IN FRONT

Make sure virtual admissions also have a 'face'. Consider a top-of-page or popup outreach message from the admissions director, such as an intro video or a letter about COVID and its impact on students and admissions. For example, Bowdoin College's admissions page links to a letter from the Dean of Admissions and Student Aid and its admitted students page has a prominent video message from the dean. For individual events, start with a welcome from enrollment and/or admissions leaders, department heads, etc. Video, whether live or prerecorded, may help connect on a personal level. Providing opportunities to see or talk to current students can be helpful as well. Student representatives often participate in admission events, while Vanderbilt University matches high school juniors with its students for virtual coffee meetings.

DEMONSTRATE VALUES

Embody the institution's values and mission in virtual admissions materials. Strategies will vary based on the institution, but make sure communications and events align with core institutional values and mission to communicate how students will fit in with and benefit from choosing your institution. Personalization and human outreach can support this by showing your institution is a welcoming environment concerned about each student as an individual.

BEST PRACTICES FOR VIRTUAL ADMISSION EVENTS

GUIDELINES FOR VIRTUAL EVENTS

In addition to admissions-specific, there are broad recommendations for virtual events overall. Developer Concept3D provides a few best practices for virtual events:

Don't try to duplicate campus events, recreate the feeling

- Don't expect virtual events to exactly mirror in-person experiences. Take advantage of unique aspects of online tools and media.
- Focus on the *feel* of events, for instance a virtual admitted student day can have breakout rooms per major/college to echo a cohort experience

Build events on audience pain points

Consider why students and parents need these admission interactions. Use the fact that events will have to be scaled back for virtual consumption to focus in on the most important things to your audience.

Offer natural integrations between channels

Physical events are relatively isolated from other events and communications, but virtual channels and interactions can be integrated. Link virtual campus tours and meetings to social media, email, etc. to construct a well-rounded admissions experience.

Find the right partners

External partners can help build tools and media. Institutions may hire VR development companies to build a robust virtual tour. Institutions may also partner with third-party student info events like Strive Scan's Virtual College Exploration Week for high school juniors or virtual admission fairs

SPOTLIGHT: AUGMENTED REALITY IN PRINTED ADMISSIONS MATERIALS

Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) implemented both virtual and augmented reality into its admission materials several years prior. These efforts were primarily targeted at admitted students, and included:

- Mobile virtual reality tour – SCAD shipped Google Cardboard headsets to accepted students that allowed them to view a VR campus tour
- Augmented reality course catalog – SCAD incorporated AR triggers that launched videos and animation within its print course catalog

Students could access both VR and AR materials via mobile apps. The new approaches appear to have been popular. According to SCAD's Executive Director of Interactive Services, applications increased 26 percent following the launch. SCAD also includes AR and VR in certain areas of its curriculum, so this may be particularly relevant to prospective students as examples of what they might learn or work on.

ASSESSING ONLINE ADMISSIONS QUALITY

The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) provides a rubric for assessing an institution's online services. The segment for admissions is shown below:

Assessment Item	Exemplary Service	Service is Available	Limited or No Service
The institution responds to prospective student inquires during the admission process.	Students can easily locate multiple ways of making inquiries. In the event a live person is not available, students are automatically directed to self-service information.	Only one option, such as telephone service, is available, or personnel who answer inquiries may have other duties that delay responding to students.	Responses to prospective student inquiries occur during standard business hours.
The institution provides virtual campus tours during the admission process.	Tours should be self-guided and cover all of the information students need. An institution may consider creating a separate tool for the completely distance learning student that covers the electronic campus and services, since that information is more relevant than the location of buildings on-campus.	Only limited information is available. Information may not be available in an organized tour or self-guided website experience. For example, a campus map is linked from one page and individual department websites contain listings of their locations and services, leaving it up to the students to find their way around the college site.	Students must attend on-campus orientation.
The institution has online applications.	The application can be accessed and submitted online. It can be started, saved, and continued as needed. Contextual help in completing the applications is available and live help is available.	The applications are available online with electronic submissions. However, assistance with applications can only be obtained during standard business hours.	The applications are available online but may require a trip to campus for assistance with it and cannot be printed and mailed to the admissions office.
The institution has the capability for documents required for the admission to be submitted online.	Transcripts, recommendation letters, shot records, and other admissions documents can be submitted online. Assistance is available after business hours.	Transcripts, recommendation letters, shot records, and other admissions documents can be submitted online. However, assistance with the applications can only be obtained during standard business hours.	Students must visit campus to submit transcripts, recommendation letters, shot records, and other admissions documents.
The institution provides onboarding service support for online students.	The institution has a web-based software program which walks the student through the application, admission, and enrollment processes step-by-step and provides the students notification as to which items are required next.	The institution provides a checklist on the website of the items required for the application, admissions, and enrollment processes. The steps are also provided on the website.	The information for the application, admissions, and enrollment processes are provided on the website; however, the students must search those answers across multiple web pages for each of the different departments.

PROFILE: UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

VIRTUAL CAMPUS EVENTS AND TOURS

University of Virginia (UVA) uses a virtual campus tour, virtual student visit day, and social media to promote the institution and guide students through admissions.

In April, after COVID required canceling its traditional "Days on the Lawn" on-campus admissions event, UVA launched a virtual version. The program includes a range of Zoom webinars on different topics, including academic sessions for accepted students, "student life sessions with representatives of groups including Residence Life, the Cavalier Marching Band and Echols Scholars, as well as a general panel of current students," and parent info sessions. Although of a large scale, the virtual option was implemented in only two weeks.

Before moving "Days on the Lawn" online, UVA's student experience website included a Virtual Grounds section with:

- A virtual campus tour developed in 2016 via a Jefferson Trust grant; the university hired YouVisit to film the campus and produce the tour
- TikTok account for prospective and accepted students with "U-Guide" videos; the videos foster a connection between applicants/accepted students and campus culture, and promotes visibility through the platform's recommendations algorithm
- Discovering Grounds quotes from students; in 2016, UVA Facebook account "asked alumni to recommend their favorite spots on and around Grounds to the new class" and selected key quotes
- Residential student testimonials and advice

SOCIAL MEDIA

In addition to the resources on its Virtual Grounds page, UVA's social media accounts include videos and student-developed admissions content.

UVA runs a dedicated admissions Twitter and Instagram that market to students and post important admissions information. The Instagram account features occasional "student takeovers" where a selected student posts an Instagram story about their experience, and these are cross-promoted on other social media accounts. UVA's YouTube account also maintains playlists for student spotlights and student experience videos, as well as a playlist with 3D campus views augmented with text descriptions.

Source: Twitter

PROFILE: UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

VIRTUAL REALITY CAMPUS TOUR

University of Oregon offers a virtual reality tour and promotes with cardboard "VR headsets."

As with a number of institutions, University of Oregon provides virtual campus tours. The institution contracted with VR developer 360 labs to develop a virtual campus experience that features 360 panoramas, video assets, and text information. Drones captured aerial footage of the campus, providing a visual overview through which prospects can navigate the campus.

To gather feedback, the tour app allows users to tag "favorite" scenes, which provides easy bookmarked access for the prospect as well as data on "which experiences people enjoyed most" that can be used to inform future updates (360 Labs).

Since 2018, the institution has mailed cardboard VR headsets to prospective students. A smartphone can be slotted into the headset, then students can view the virtual tour on their standard mobile device. The headsets are branded with the university's mascot, and its mascot is featured in a promotional video about the VR experience (see the screenshot on the right).

Source: 360 Labs

Source: EdSurge

PROFILE: IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

PERSONAL OUTREACH AND VIRTUAL EVENTS

Iowa State University uses virtual tours and admission events, student-created blogs, and personal outreach in response to COVID-19.

Recently, Iowa State's admissions director, Katharine Johnson Suski, published a letter which opens with a personal introduction about her and her son's experience, then provides factual information on how admissions is adjusting in response to COVID. According to Suski, "Many families have said the letter really solidified their belief that Iowa State University is the right place for their student."

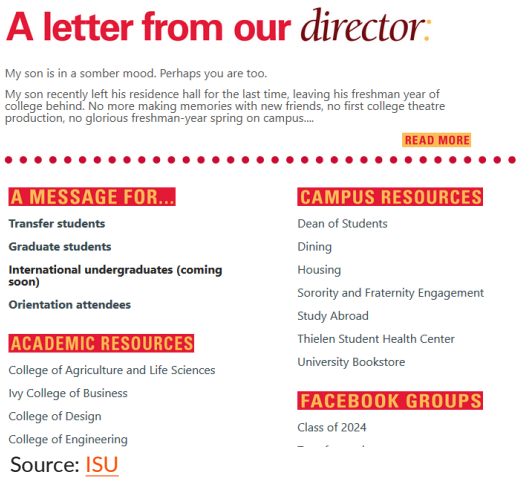
ISU's admissions page immediately loads a popup with the beginning of the letter and a link to read the remainder, followed by messages to specific audiences and links to resources. The page also has an "Important Announcements" header section with links to COVID-19 updates, virtual visit programming, and the virtual 2020 summer orientation.

Virtual Events

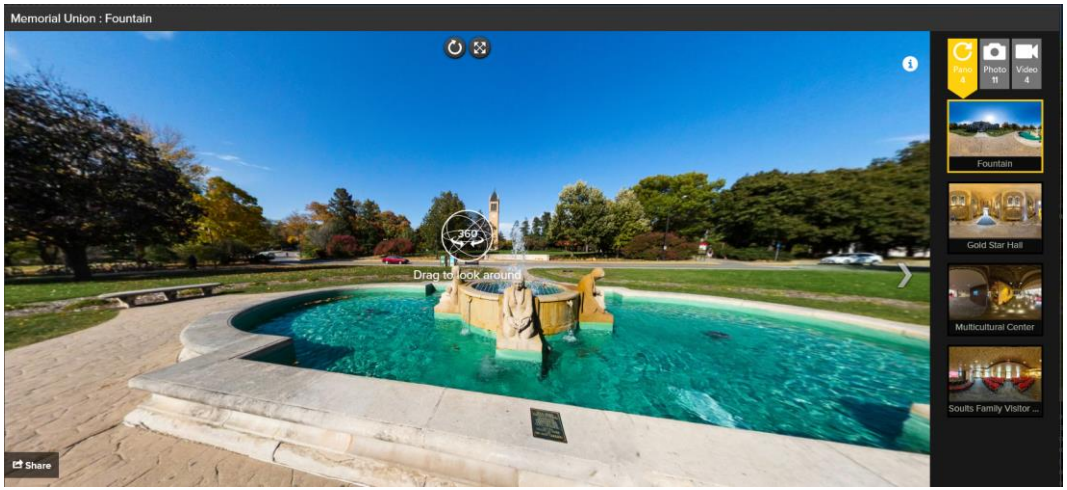
- ISU maintains a narrated virtual campus tour, with separate options for the main campus and graduate colleges; the tour can be accessed via a VR mobile app for headsets like Google Cardboard
- After canceling on-campus visits, the institution is "offering virtual visits with options ranging from daily virtual visits, transfer virtual visits, and specially designed programming for admitted students." Virtual visits open with admissions information sessions and live student panels, with sessions for specific sub-groups such as transfer students
- ISU announced that for its 2020 summer orientation, it will "transition to online services and course registration and expand programming during Week of Welcome in August" but full details are not available

Social Media

- Maintains a hub page for student life-related content, including links to:
  - CycloneLife, a blog with student testimonials and stories, photos, and videos that seeks to show applicants what life at ISU is like
  - Admissions-specific Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube accounts



Source: ISU



Source: ISU

PROFILE: WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

STUDENT-RUN SOCIAL MEDIA

West Virginia University (WVU) has made significant use of Snapchat and other visual social media for admissions marketing and events.

WVU's social media blog indicates use of Snapchat as far back as 2015 for admissions – key efforts include:

- "Takeover Tuesday" where a student is selected to run the institution's Snapchat account and document their day on each Tuesday throughout the year
- In August 2015 it hosted Ask WVU, a Snapchat Q&A events for incoming students that received more than 400 questions
- In 2017, its social media student interns used Snapchat Spectacles to do walk-through tours of campus; "one of our main goals at West Virginia University is to show what campus is really like…Prospective students may have taken a campus tour to get the lay of the land, but this campaign sought to offer up general advice on how to be a Mountaineer"

WVU expanded from Snapchat and also uses Instagram Stories.

It also maintains My WVU Life, a vlog series detailing student experiences and showcasing student talent; the series was launched based on indicators that the prospective student audience likes video blogs and the success of Takeover Tuesdays.

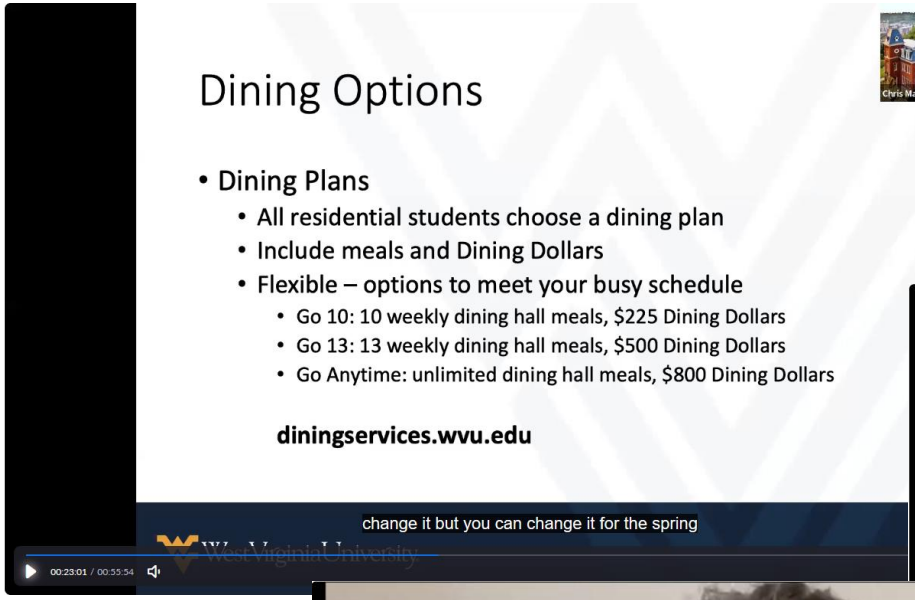
VIRTUAL RESOURCE HUB

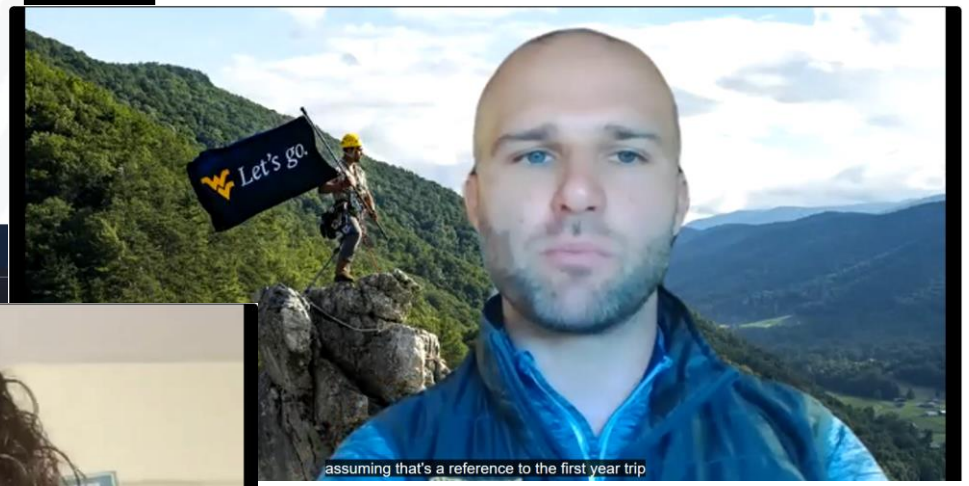
West Virginia University (WVU) has a centralized virtual resources page which is prominently linked from the main website.

A large "Apply to WVU" banner on the front page links to its virtual resources page including:

- Prominent link to COVID-19 updates
- Virtual admitted student open house with sessions on paying for college, living on campus, and Q&A with key staff members and services coordinators; WVU provides archived videos of the event for those who could not attend or would like to rewatch it (see following page)
- Class of 2024 Social Center, a hub for admitted students to connect via Facebook group and access promotional items like desktop and mobile wallpapers, links to videos including campus tours and a campus Spotify playlist; WVU also maintains Facebook groups for parents of admitted students and transfer students
- Tour guide livestreams and webinars
- Live chats with current students and admissions representatives
- Virtual campus and housing tour with narration, which can be viewed via website or VR mobile app
- Virtual meetings with department representatives to answer academic questions

WVU VIRTUAL ADMITTED STUDENTS EVENT





Source: Virtual Decide WVU Day

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