Ready, Set, O.

Every year Michigan Tech’s first-year students start a journey. We call it O-Week, and over time, it’s become a critical part of the Tech experience. Find out how we help students get off on the right paw and why it’s such an important part of our success.
O-Week: Way more than banana splits and boat races

At face value, freshman orientation is about practical matters like registering for classes—but actually, it's about so much more.

When incoming Michigan Tech students and their families arrive in Houghton for Orientation—likely after a long drive—one reality is top of mind: their new Husky won't be coming home for a while.

Michigan Tech is a destination school. It's close to nowhere and far from just about everywhere, so students can't easily get home on the weekends. Many schools offer condensed half-day mid-summer orientation programs. Tech's weeklong Orientation helps students adjust personally, socially, and academically through intentional programs providing thoughtful opportunities to connect with peers, faculty, and staff. When students emerge from Orientation, or O-week, they are settled and ready for classes to begin.

“There’s been a culture change. Orientation wasn’t something students looked forward to. Now it’s something they wouldn’t want to miss.”

Bonnie Gorman, Dean of Students

For as long as we can remember, Orientation at Tech has been mandatory. It used to be students were ushered into an auditorium, asked some questions, and were done. “There’s been a culture change. Orientation wasn’t something students looked forward to. Now it’s something they wouldn’t want to miss,” says Bonnie Gorman, dean of students.

Back in 1997, one student leader was charged with O-week planning. As the program improved, two additional student staff members were added. The students work with a professional staff member planning logistics, training, and marketing year-round.

Tech’s student leaders guide Orientation programming. The nearly 80 Orientation Team Leaders, or OTLs, are a mix of personalities—outgoing and introverted—who are excited to get students comfortable and aware of campus resources and expectations, and in the mindset to be successful. The OTLs themselves go through a weeklong training program just prior to O-week.
Navigating the first week on campus with a peer leader and cohorts takes some of the social anxiety away. “Students know that on the first day of Orientation they will at least have their group of 20 students to be with. They see themselves in the OTLs and that builds a level of trust,” says Susan Liebau, director of the Waino Wahtera Center for Student Success.

The OTLs, in turn, walk away with leadership opportunities and hands-on problem solving, communication, and group management experience.

Sprinkled throughout hard-hitting programming on topics such as plagiarism and appropriate social media use, are campus traditions like Vegas Night in the residence halls, the first-year class picture on Sherman Field—and yes—the 500-foot banana split. Newer traditions have cropped up, including Afternoon on the Town, which provides a valuable opportunity for downtown businesses to engage with new students, plus Outdoor Adventure Program trips to places like Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore.

Increasingly, colleges have added parent-focused programming to their orientation lineup. “Administrators have much more contact with parents than ever before. At Michigan Tech we are very intentional about how we plan for and include students’ parents and families during Orientation,” Gorman confirms. Orientation is also a chance to introduce the culture of Michigan Tech, what it means to feel and act like a Husky. “Our values—tenacity, accountability, community, scholarship, and possibilities—are woven into our messaging,” says Gorman.

Orientation week is a campus event. O-week requires all campus departments, faculty, and staff to be all in and all hands on deck, without which, it quite literally would be impossible to pull off. The result—the impact—is real and is one of the many pieces that contribute to retention. “Everyone takes something different away from O-week. Next year it may look a little different; students will tell us what they need and we’ll respond to that. We’re just doing what’s right for our students,” Liebau says.

**“We constantly evaluate and ask if we’re providing the absolute best Orientation for our students.”**

Susan Liebau  
Director, Waino Wahtera Center for Student Success

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**Advancement**
Raised $12.6 million in gifts, meeting more than 80 percent of our fiscal-year goal in the first nine weeks.

Made 220 visits across 29 states and three Canadian provinces in the first nine weeks.

Expecting more than $100 million in cash from planned gifts in the next 25 years.

**Alumni Relations**
134 of the 1,029 engraved pavers on Huskies Plaza were sponsored by Young Alumni.

Reunion brought 418 alumni and friends back to campus, raising $2.8 million in class reunion gifts.

**Athletics**
2014–15 saw five NCAA tournament teams, four All-Americans, and eight individual national qualifiers.

**Dean of Students**
Five percent of our students receive support through Disability Services.

**Enrollment**
Overall enrollment is 7,238—the highest since 1983 (7,414).

There are 1,947 female students on campus, or 26.9 percent of our student body.

College of Engineering was 14 percent female back in 2005; today it’s 25 percent female—an all-time high.
Unlike most international students, Felipe Silva of Angola didn’t arrange for transportation from Houghton County Memorial Airport to campus.

During the flight from Chicago O’Hare to Hancock, he conversed with a friendly lady who, as it turned out, was Bernadette Boehmer, mother of John Lehman, associate vice president for enrollment, marketing, and communications. Bernadette and John, who was waiting at the airport to greet his mother, drove Felipe to his final destination—Wadsworth Hall. From day one it was clear to Felipe what kind of place Michigan Tech is.

Also unlike most international undergraduate students, Felipe is sponsored by Sonangol, a major state-run oil company. Per his contract, he will complete his studies in geophysics in four to five years and return home to work for Sonangol for twice the time they paid for his studies, about eight to 10 years. In exchange, Sonangol compensates Felipe for everything from utility bills to tuition. This relationship—a scholarship—is only available to exceptional Angolan students.

Sonangol strategically recruits students to fill specific positions based on expected retirement dates of their current employees. Felipe’s major, career path, and role in the company are mostly pre-determined for him. He did, however, have a choice as to which university to attend. Felipe says he chose Tech because of how well it ranked in notable publications like US News and World Report and Washington Monthly. The beauty of campus and surrounding natural features also impressed him.

“Honestly it was the picture of the University—right on the [Portage] Canal. That’s unique,” he says.

Michigan Tech is the second US university Felipe has attended. He studied English as a Second Language at Indiana University for a year prior to transferring to Tech. He’s also visited Portugal, England, Scotland, and lived in Brazil for five years. “I like the Midwest. We Africans are warm and so are the people of the Midwest.”

Felipe liked Michigan Tech enough that he recruited nine other Sonangol-sponsored Angolan students to attend Tech with him. This fall, Ademilson Tungo, Allan Kambindama, Dayol Carvalho, Domilton Cubuia, Dorival Silva, Eric Oliveira, Fernando Chambole, Garcia Bongo, and Janayna Manuel joined Felipe on campus. Now entering his second year, Felipe shows his first-year friends the ropes and lends a hand whenever needed.

“My phone rings a lot. They get stuck at Walmart and need a ride. I am a role model of sorts. Plus they know if I survived a winter here, they can too,” he says, chuckling.

Felipe is forging a path for his friends with the guidance and support of John Gierke, professor and chair of geological and mining engineering and sciences. “Geophysics is our smallest major. [The addition of] the Angolan students this year more than doubled our numbers! That’s why we have them out to my farm—to bond and interact,” Gierke says.

When he’s not munching on blueberries at Gierke Farm, studying, or helping his friends, Felipe takes full advantage of the Upper Peninsula landscape. “I go to Prince’s Point. I ride my bike along the waterfront. I just visited Pictured Rocks, which was incredibly beautiful.”

Felipe is grateful for the opportunity he has at Michigan Tech through Sonangol. “I look forward to giving back to my country. I feel joy in that.”