

Shaping UNC's First Impressions

Inside the Barnard Building at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Room 101 is buzzing. It's filled with first-year students stumbling through icebreakers and trying to learn school chants. Right now, they're strangers, but by May, they'll feel like family.

Jenny Richards is one of those freshmen. She laughs along with everyone else, a little nervous but also a little excited by the energy of a place she would soon call home.

Now, years later at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she stands on the other side of that same experience.

Richards is UNC's Orientation Leader Development Coordinator, meaning she trains the students who will welcome the next class of Tar Heels. But she hasn't forgotten what it felt like sitting in those rooms, learning the chants meeting new people and trying to figure out where she fits in.

"I've been heavily involved in orientation since I was an undergrad," Richards said. "I was an Orientation Leader myself at UNCC and being an OL really shaped how I see the university."

That experience still guides how she leads now. She knows how overwhelming those first few days can feel, but also how quickly they can matter. Before classes begin and before friend groups fully form, orientation is often the first real introduction students have to campus life and to each other.

"I met my best friend at my orientation," current orientation leader, Caitlyn Murphy said. "It's a lot of people's first time at UNC with the people they're going to be with for the next four years and I think that really brings people together."

Richards isn't just leading sessions from the front of the room; she's part of everything. She moves between tables, checks in with students, answers questions and makes sure no one feels left out.

"It can be challenging sometimes," Richards said. "I don't expect everyone to be best friends, but during spring training, we push them to get to know each other more."

One of those training weekends doesn't happen in a classroom at all. Instead, it takes place at Camp Oak Hill in Oxford, North Carolina, where orientation leaders spend a few days getting to know each other outside of campus.

Before going on this retreat, the group realized it was scheduled for the same weekend as the Duke–UNC basketball game, something that, at a school like UNC, feels almost unacceptable. But Richards made sure it didn't have to be.

She found a way to stream the game, showed up with a themed cookie cake and turned the night into an event. The group gathered outside, watching under the open sky, making s'mores and cheering together.

It wasn't part of the official schedule, but it became one of the moments people remembered most.

For orientation leaders, those kinds of experiences matter just as much as anything in a training manual.

“Jenny has influenced my experience by being so kind and open to anyone who needs it,” Murphy said. “She’s made me feel more comfortable in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people.”

That sense of comfort doesn't happen by accident. Richards is intentional about creating it, especially within a group as large and diverse as the OL team.

London Dernis, another member of this year's OL cohort, says that effort shows up in small but meaningful ways.

“I've met 40 really cool people I wouldn't have met otherwise,” Dernis said. “Orientation naturally brings people together, but a big thanks goes to our leaders, Jenny and the OL captains, who really encourage us to get to know each other.”

Part of that unity comes through structured programs that Jenny has implemented, like the OLs weekly “Heel Hangs,” where leaders are paired off each week to spend time together. These low commitment hangouts are something simple that helps create and strengthen real friendships.

“She’s a calm, gentle energy,” Dernis said. “She keeps us on track without shutting down how energetic we are. She really helps foster that environment.”

For Richards, that environment is the whole point.

“The goal of the orientation program is to build connections with incoming students and help UNC feel as close to home as possible,” she said.

Orientation leaders are often the first real connection new students have when they arrive. They answer questions, guide groups across campus and set the tone for those first few days.

“OLs help bridge that gap,” Richards said. “They’re a welcoming, friendly face that builds relationships with incoming students.”

That role feels especially important now. Students arrive on campus from increasingly different backgrounds; many of them used to forming friendships online rather than in person. Orientation is one of the few spaces where everyone is starting from the same place.

For Richards, that’s what makes the work meaningful. Orientation isn’t just about schedules or checklists. It’s about creating an experience that gets students excited to call themselves Tarheels.



The New Student Family Programs Team (Right to Left: Jenny Richards, Ian Reynolds, Rosmary Roberts, Justin Inscoe)