

Keeping Older Adults Connected and Engaged

ideas ⁴²



Increasing access to online classes and events

The COVID-19 pandemic cut off in-person social activities for many Americans, and one of the hardest hit groups was older adults. Recognizing the critical role of organized community activities in keeping its older adult members active and avoiding social isolation, University Settlement converted its programming for remote participation. Settlement staff turned to the ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center for assistance in maximizing member engagement in virtual activities. We worked with them to identify the behavioral barriers to participation and redesign the program calendar and outreach to mitigate these barriers.

Summary

University Settlement offers educational and social services to residents of the Lower East Side of New York City and beyond. Their work includes helping older adults stay connected, active and engaged through robust programming in residential and community centers like the [Neighborhood Center](#) and [Meltzer Center](#).

Like many service providers across the country, University Settlement shifted its classes and events to a remote format due to the COVID-19 pandemic, using platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams for video and telephone-based classes, respectively. However, University Settlement's staff noticed a troubling pattern: members weren't attending the online activities, even when they had the necessary technology. While interacting in-person wasn't safe, isolation [comes with its own health risks](#) for older adults. Staff were especially concerned because many members mentioned during check-in calls that they weren't doing much at home, which increased their risk of cognitive decline.

ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center partnered with University Settlement to better understand the barriers impeding their members from participating in remote activities. We explored whether behavioral solutions could address barriers to engagement, and designed ways to help older adults feel comfortable with, interested in, and equipped to participate in remote activities in the future.

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This work was also meant to inform University Settlement's long-term strategy. Up until the pandemic, University Settlement's programming played an important role in supporting its members' happiness and health—but only for members who were still mobile enough and comfortable coming to community centers. Looking ahead, University Settlement wanted to fill this gap by continuing to offer remote-only and hybrid activities to support members regardless of whether they can or want to leave their homes.

Highlights

- ▶ Remote activity options help keep older adults engaged and connected when it is unsafe for them to interact in-person.
- ▶ Overly complex activity calendars and instructions can discourage engagement.
- ▶ Simplifying and streamlining communication makes it easier for older adults to participate.

Barriers and Motivations to Participating in Virtual Activities

To understand the barriers to participating in remote activities, we surveyed members and conducted phone interviews with members and staff.

Staff reported that when members heard about remote activities during check-in calls in late 2020, most were unenthusiastic and frequently asked about the timeline for reopening. Our phone conversations with members and the survey responses supported these observations from staff, and revealed other barriers, including:

- ▶ **The activities weren't always salient.** This was partly because many communications from University Settlement focused on more urgent needs and services, like food pantries, and staff did not always have time to talk about the activities during their brief check-in calls. Shortly before our calls with clients, staff had begun conducting outreach specifically about the activities, and we saw that this added **salience** had already begun to increase the number of members attending activities.
- ▶ **Members didn't see themselves as people who would or could use video technology.** Many were confused by and wary of using the necessary applications and/or technology. This **mental model** could contribute to members not trying virtual activities at all.

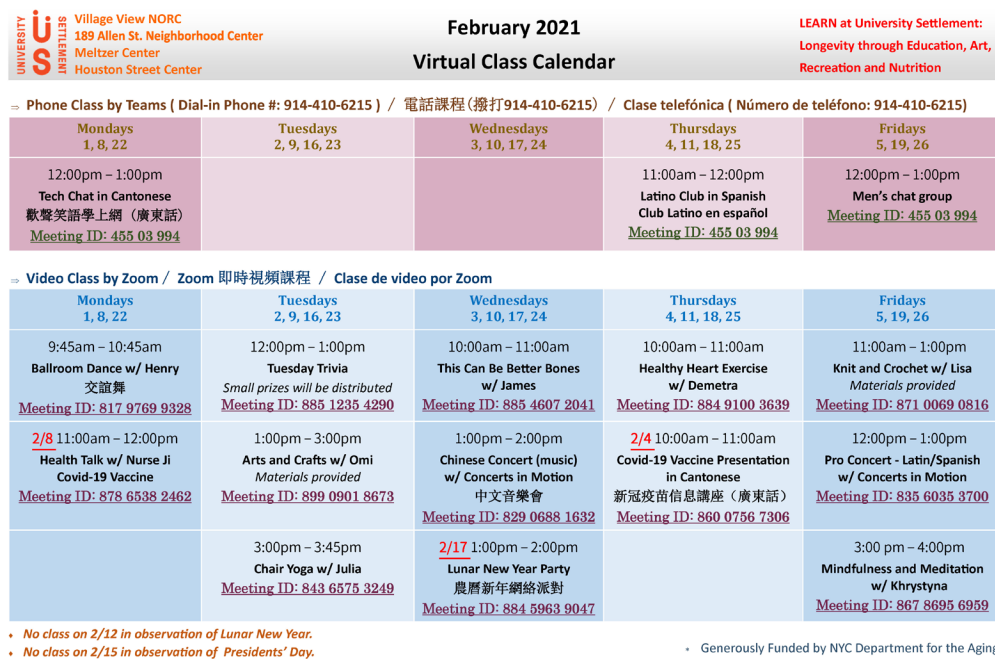
Despite barriers to participating in remote activities, we also found several motivators, or common reasons members cited for attending a class, that could inform behavioral designs:

- 1. Loneliness and boredom:** Before the COVID-19 lockdowns, many members often spent the entire day at their center with friends. Now, they only left their homes to go to the pharmacy and grocery store.
- 2. Acceptance of the "new normal":** As lockdown continued, many members had come to accept the new ways of attending classes, and decided it was better than nothing.
- 3. Popular teachers:** Staff mentioned that remote versions of popular in-person classes tended to garner more interest from clients. In some conversations and survey responses, members mentioned their favorite teachers as their reason for attending.
- 4. Social Proof/Norms:** Members were more likely to express interest or attend **if they knew their friends would be there**, or if friends encouraged them to go.

Encouraging Remote Participation

University Settlement already distributed a calendar of activities to members and staff. Offered both digitally and in print, it displayed the coming month's activities on the first page and described how to join online or by phone on the second. Some members already received this trilingual calendar (Chinese, Spanish and English) electronically or had seen it posted on their building's bulletin board.

Figure 1: Calendar used by University Settlement before our redesign

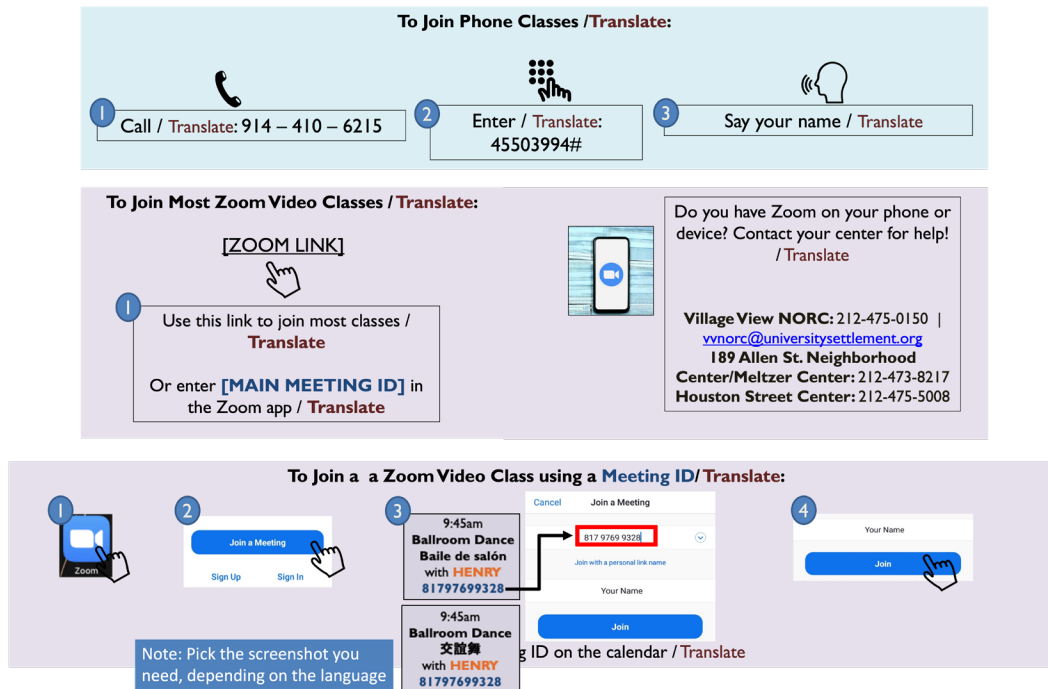


As this calendar was already in use and was an effective tool to share information about upcoming activities, we redesigned it and made suggestions for how to further simplify the log in process for attending virtual programs. For example, on the front side of the original calendar, each activity was listed with its own unique Meeting ID, which is a Zoom code members had to use to access the event. The back side of the original calendar contained instructions for how to join the different types of activities in three different languages. These instructions created a few challenges that could be daunting to inexperienced members:

- ▶ Using multiple IDs and including instructions in all languages added a lot of text to the calendar, which made it difficult to navigate and could make members feel like joining a virtual activity would be complicated (since the instructions looked complicated).
- ▶ The design created a barrier to entry for members who were unfamiliar with Zoom and Meeting ID's. To know how to use the Meeting ID, members had to read through the back side of the calendar and find the instructions.

To address these barriers, we suggested using one Meeting ID for most activities (and only introducing new Meeting IDs when necessary). This reduced the amount of text on the calendar and also meant clients had fewer steps to learn. We also made other changes to the calendar:

Figure 2: Changes made to University Settlement calendar



► **Icons and images to present instructions visually.**

Presenting instructions visually reduces the amount of text in the calendar while enhancing accessibility for members who speak different languages. Images were also meant to help members feel more confident following the instructions, since they could match the images in the instructions to what was on their screen.

► **Highlighting the names of instructors in the calendar**

using color so members can easily find their favorite classes.

► **Highlighting that help is available**

in a prominently placed, bolded call-out box with contact information at each senior center. We wanted to signal to members that it's okay and easy to ask for help.

Rather than make a single calendar to distribute both in print and digitally, we designed separate versions to optimize the benefits and features of each format. In addition to the changes described above, we designed the print version to closely resemble the original monthly calendar, since members were already used to seeing it posted in building lobbies.

For the digital version, we changed the format to make it as seamless as possible for members to join classes using clickable links. We found that a table format organized by day of the week was the easiest for members to use. This table is now regularly shared with members via email.

Figure 3: Template of digital version of calendar

UNIVERSITY SETTLEMENT VIRTUAL OLDER ADULT PROGRAMS – [MONTH] 2021

	Time	Zoom Classes	Zoom Meeting ID	Zoom Link
MONDAYS	9:30 AM	Resistance Band Workout Mary		
	9:45 AM	Ballroom Dance James		
	[Time]	Name Instructor Name		

In addition to encouraging University Settlement to further utilize channels members were familiar with and responded to (like the WeChat messaging platform and email) to distribute the calendar, we also suggested posting larger versions in public spaces near the center to raise awareness about the classes. Members mentioned they often passed by a closed center while they were on errands so they could see the calendar posted outside of the building.

Recommendations for Remote Programming Moving Forward

We also developed recommendations to help University Settlement plan their long-term strategy of continuing to offer activities remotely even as in-person programming returns. These recommendations included:

- ▶ **Make sure remote programming remains a salient option:** As in-person programming becomes possible, staff and members alike will be excited to return to old activities. This excitement could mean remote activities are publicized less frequently, become less salient in staff and members’ conversations, or are even replaced with in-person versions. To maintain the momentum and interest University Settlement has built around these remote activities, we recommended being strategic in how they re-introduce in-person programming so it doesn’t overshadow remote activities. This includes publicizing both types of activities similarly— or together—so both remain salient, and introducing new, exciting remote activities that would catch members’ attention.
- ▶ **Frame remote programming and joining an in-person activity remotely as appealing options, not as second-choice backups:** While University Settlement benefited from members’ acceptance of the new normal during the pandemic, members who attended remote activities because it was “better than nothing” may still have a (common) bias against remote programming. It’s important to actively counteract this bias to encourage continued participation in virtual activities and to help those who join in-person activities remotely feel welcome. Strategies to work against this bias range from avoiding language like “if you can’t join in person” to providing clear guidelines to the instructors on what they should do to make everyone feel included in hybrid settings. Small choices like where cameras, microphones, and speakers are set up, or pausing and directing questions to members joining remotely can go a long way to foster inclusion. Additionally, we recommended creating appealing activities that are only offered remotely. For example, some

arts and crafts classes could happen over the phone, with members using the hands-free speaker mode to talk with others while they work and share their progress on the project. These activities could be attractive to some members because there are fewer barriers to join (e.g. no travel, you can join even if you're not feeling well), and would be equally accessible to all.

- ▶ **Provide as much tech help as possible:** Once in-person programming returns, members are more likely to feel the hassles involved in joining a virtual activity are not worth it. Even with increased publicity and tailored offerings, members will still need to feel comfortable using the technology to access classes. As a result, it will be important to continue offering new ways to learn and feel comfortable with technology. This tech help can be provided by University Settlement staff through one-on-one tech help sessions or office hours, by members' home attendants or family members, or even by tech-savvy members who could be matched with peers who want assistance. Seeing peers using the technology successfully and understanding how they're doing it can make less experienced members feel more capable of using it themselves.

What's Next?

The switch to virtual socialization due to COVID-19 was an adjustment many people experienced, but it posed a particular risk of increased social isolation for older adults who didn't know about available options or see themselves as tech-savvy users. The insights gleaned from this project—making programming salient and proactively connecting people with technical assistance—could be adapted to make a variety of programs more accessible to those who can't attend in-person during the pandemic and beyond, as an additional way to prevent social isolation among older adults.

University Settlement has implemented the new calendar and received positive feedback from the community that it's easier to read and the instructions to join activities are easy to follow. The staff report that this work helped them make great strides in encouraging members to join remote activities. In addition to helping them redesign the calendar, our project prompted them to have more exploratory conversations with their members about online activities, which helped engage clients further.

Since our work together ended, University Settlement has seen consistent attendance at their popular remote classes, and staff have continued iterating on the calendar and getting feedback. This project also created an opportunity for staff to reimagine how they collaborate. To conduct the redesign, we encouraged new centers to collaborate closely and uncovered opportunities to engage with clients in new ways, both of which they're excited to continue leveraging in their work.

University Settlement's efforts to reimagine older adult programming in a remote format is a positive and important step forward for all adult centers in New York City. We hope that behaviorally informed solutions continue to strengthen the appeal and experience of the programs for large numbers of older adults across University Settlements' multiple centers and beyond.

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