PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

USC Rossier
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Promoting At-promise College Student Success through Peer Mentoring

INTRODUCTION

Peer mentoring is a popular tool utilized by postsecondary institutions to support at-promise students (see definition below) as they navigate the transition to college. Peer mentoring pairs student mentors with similarly aged mentees during their transition to college for the purpose of information sharing, academic/career path strategizing, social support, and assistance navigating postsecondary learning environments.[1] Some peer mentoring programs focus on academic tutoring, whereas others focus on introduction to campus resources, networking skills, and opportunities to socialize or volunteer.[2] Peer mentoring programs most commonly target first year students and are often affiliated with larger student support programs (e.g., learning communities).[3] Research illustrates the promise and potential of peer mentoring as a strategy to promote college student success.[4]

Peer mentoring programs commonly involve a variety of stakeholders beyond the mentors and mentees. Designated program staff play an important role in developing activities, guiding mentors, and nurturing community among mentors and mentees alike; program administrators set the mentoring program structure, oversee mentoring program staff, engage in mentoring program evaluation, and serve as liaisons for the program in the larger university context. University administrators play a key role in securing support and funding for mentoring programs, thus ensuring the viability and sustainability of the program. The effectiveness of peer mentoring programs can be enhanced by support from residential program staff, mental health staff, faculty members, student affairs staff, and learning community colleagues, among others—thus integrating peer mentoring in the larger community of at-promise college student support.

TSLC PEER MENTORING PROGRAM

Peer mentoring is implemented as part of the Thompson Scholars Learning Community (TSLC) comprehensive college transition program at three University of Nebraska campuses.[5] The purpose of the TSLC peer mentoring program is to promote at-promise student success, including increased sense of belonging, feelings of mattering, and greater student confidence in academic and career pathways. TSLC's peer mentoring program requires all first-year program participants to regularly meet with an assigned peer mentor (usually a second-year at-promise student) individually and in small groups. The peer mentor serves as a first-line of support to at-promise students transitioning to college and aids students in navigating challenges and opportunities on the path to college success. TSLC program staff match mentees with peer mentors based on similar goals, backgrounds (e.g., major), and interests.

TSLC mentors undergo training to learn how to provide mentees with comprehensive guidance and asset-based support related to their academic, social, and career development and success. Training consists of outlining their role and responsibilities as mentors, exploring common mentoring scenarios they may face in a safe, supportive learning environment, sharing effective mentor-mentee communication strategies, and explaining best practices and additional campus resources they can draw on to support their mentees. TSLC staff provide on-going professional development opportunities and support for peer mentors to promote a successful mentor-mentee relationship such as regular peer mentor group meetings to discuss common mentoring issues and provide access to a community of peer mentor support.

DEFINITIONS

- **Academic self-efficacy**: An individual's belief in their ability to successfully execute the tasks necessary to achieve academic success.[6]
- **At-promise students**: Students who have been marginalized by the education system with a particular focus on low-income students, first-generation college students, and/or racially minoritized students. The term challenges deficit language (e.g., at-risk) and centers the strengths, assets, and potential of students and also emphasizes the responsibility of educational systems to address inequities through their commitment to minoritized groups (i.e., "the promise") by recognizing and addressing the complex and interlocking phenomena that negatively impact at-promise student success.[7]
- **Comprehensive college transition program**: A program designed to support the transition of at-promise students to postsecondary education that offers multi-pronged, wrap-around support to promote the success of underserved and marginalized students transitioning to college, including academic, social, major/career, and financial support.
- **Major and career self-efficacy**: The belief in one's ability to successfully complete the necessary tasks to make decisions about a career and, relatedly, academic plans of study.[8]
- **Mattering**: A person's perception that they are valued as an individual and that others care about their personal well-being and success.[9]
- **Peer mentoring**: Peer mentoring entails intentionally structured interactions where a more experienced student peer offers guidance and support to a more novice student as they navigate a postsecondary setting.[10] Peer mentoring is most commonly sanctioned by programs or the institution and is often utilized as a tool to support the college transition and success of at-promise students.
- **Sense of belonging**: A feeling of being connected to a group, accepted by peers, and of being an integral part of a campus community.[11]

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The *Promoting At-promise Student Success* (PASS) project is a longitudinal study of at-promise student success at three campuses of the University of Nebraska system.[12] As part of the PASS project, we studied the TSLC comprehensive college transition program that aims to promote at-promise student success through holistic, wrap-around support that includes a peer mentoring component. Leveraging mixed methods data from the PASS project, we explored the impact of engagement with TSLC peer mentoring on at-promise student success.[13] We found that engagement with TSLC peer mentoring led to significantly increased sense of belonging, feelings of mattering, academic self-efficacy, and major and career self-efficacy among at-promise students, which are factors associated with college student retention and psychosocial success.

Our study identified three primary facets of TSLC peer mentoring that contributed to at-promise student college success:

1. **Proactive College Guidance/Navigation**: Peer mentors cultivated at-promise students' college knowledge and proactively helped students navigate college support and structures by mapping campus resources aligned with individual student needs, challenges, and goals.
2. **Validating Messages**: How peer mentors delivered support mattered and there was a positive impact on student success when mentors used asset-based, affirming language that communicated their sincerely held beliefs in mentees' capabilities for college success.
3. **Holistic Support**: Mentors built, sustained, and deepened relationships with mentees through holistic, multifaceted support that recognized the influence of both personal (e.g., family, socioemotional) and academic (e.g., class experiences, grades) factors on at-promise college student success.

These findings indicate the promise and potential of the TSLC peer mentoring program as a model for others seeking to (re)design, develop, and/or implement effective peer mentoring programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations derive from lessons learned from the TSLC program's peer mentoring practices and are aligned with PASS project research about what makes peer mentoring successful as articulated in the section above. When developing a peer mentoring program, selecting, training and sustaining high quality peer mentors and peer mentor-mentee relationships are key. Cultivating an effective peer mentoring program involves multiple steps, each involving intentionality and oversight.

Peer mentoring program structure will vary based on the program goals and institutional resources allocated to the mentoring program. Below are a few key considerations for designing an effective peer mentoring program.

- Establish a mentor-mentee curriculum that entails a clear set of concrete objectives that are responsive to both mentee and mentor needs over the course of the mentoring program. The curriculum should offer opportunities to build connection and trust with mentees, allow for holistic, validating, and proactive engagement between peer mentors and mentees, and enable mentors to leverage campus resources that aid in delivery of effective support. It is critical that each aspect of the mentoring curriculum be mapped onto the specific aims and goals of the mentoring program to streamline work and ensure effectiveness of the program in meeting its objectives.

- Design meetings with mentees to follow a curriculum while also leaving room to tailor sessions to meet mentees' needs. Encourage mentors to draw on examples from mentor orientation, training, and professional development opportunities to guide their mentee support. However, mentors should be trained to recognize that what works for other mentors or strategies they have employed with other mentees may need to be adjusted and tailored to the unique circumstances, experiences, and identities of the individual mentee. Ensure that mentors are trained to be reflective in their practice and responsive to the diverse cultural backgrounds of students. The curriculum should not be prescriptive, but rather offer flexible guidance to mentors that can be tailored to individual student needs, goals, and challenges. During the first mentor meeting, consider using a "Getting to Know You" tool to help mentors learn about each individual mentee's experiences, identities, goals, and anticipated challenges early on to inform the kind of mentor support that is offered in subsequent peer mentor meetings.

- To implement proactive college guidance/navigation, validation, and holistic engagement as part of effective peer mentoring, consider some of the following activities for 1:1 or group peer mentoring sessions:
  - sharing announcements, including reminders about university-related deadlines such as when bills are issued and due, when class registration takes place, the last day to drop courses, etc.;
  - fielding questions generated by mentee;
  - offering relationship-building activities (e.g., get-to-know-you activities, identifying students' highs and lows of the week and acting accordingly to support students as they navigate those highs and lows);
  - Asking proactive questions to solicit student opinions and perceptions about their college experiences and leveraging this information to tailor the kind of support and resources the mentee may need;
  - anticipating, identifying, and addressing student needs, challenges, and goals with the understanding that these issues may emerge and evolve over time;

- directing mentees to resources on campus to enable their success in addressing needs, challenges, and goals;
- making mentees aware of college enrichment activities and opportunities to maximize their college experience and success;
- reassuring mentees of their capabilities for college success—particularly in the face of challenges—and validating students for their growth and success.

- Nurture a peer mentoring community by hosting community dinners or meetings where mentors facilitate conversation with their mentee group. If peer mentees participate in a first year or sophomore seminar, consider incorporating peer mentors into the seminars, which can provide a space to build community and reinforce the work of mentors in a group setting.

- Dedicate space for mentors and mentees to work, study, and/or socialize together. Devoted peer mentoring space helps mentors and students develop a sense of belonging and fosters opportunities for informal relationship building that can strengthen bonds and enhance the likelihood that peer mentoring will be impactful.

Mentor selection and assignment requires significant intentionality.

- Select mentors with varied identities, backgrounds, and personalities to relate to a wide range of mentees who come from diverse backgrounds and identities.

- Pair mentors and mentees with great care. When pairing mentors with mentees, consider personal identities and backgrounds, majors, hometowns, personalities, and level of coaching needed for the peer mentor.

- During hiring interviews, ask questions to gauge mentors' approaches to building relationships, beliefs about student assets and strengths, ability to connect with students with diverse identities and backgrounds, and leadership skills to assist students with navigating resources and overcoming barriers.

- If a peer mentoring program has a residential component, also consider mentor living placements in order to cultivate community on residential floors. Coordinate with Residence Life for housing placements and staff interactions during training. In cases where live-in mentors are not possible, consider allocation of designated space for mentor-mentee meetings and interactions.

Trainings and orientations are key to onboarding and retaining effective peer mentors.

- Host a dedicated peer mentoring orientation for mentors. If you do not have the capacity to develop your own peer mentoring training, programs such as the College Reading & Learning Association (CRLA) offer certified, six day trainings on various topics relevant to effective peer mentoring and aligned with the TSLC approach.

- Provide peer mentors with binders or a centralized online folder with campus and mentoring resources and the peer mentoring curriculum to ensure they have easy access to written guidelines and support practices for effective peer mentoring.

- When orienting mentors, emphasize the importance of nurturing a network of validating relationships and using validating messages and interactions throughout the mentoring process. This approach includes situating learning in student experiences; using reflective practice in training, mentor groups, orientation sessions; and teaching mentors about holistic, identity-conscious, and asset-based approaches to helping students address challenges and seek out opportunities to achieve their college goals.[14]

- Emphasize the importance of proactively engaging with mentees to identify challenges and

opportunities and illustrate how to map on mentoring/campus resources appropriately.

- Build and role model holistic connections with mentors in ways that recognize the intertwining personal and academic factors that shape their success in college, and illustrate the importance of mentors similarly learning about, recognizing, and supporting their student mentees holistically.

- Provide opportunities for peer mentors to role play how to interact with mentees, including potential challenging or awkward interactions they might face or common support scenarios they may encounter so that they have an opportunity to practice navigating those situations in a safe, supportive peer mentor learning environment.

- Provide mentors with mentee names, pronunciations, photographs, and pronouns so they can commit to memory who their student mentees are during orientation/training—these are part-and-parcel to developing trusting, holistic, and validating relationships with mentees.

- Include training in Title IX, Clery Act, and mandatory reporting on child abuse/neglect and suicidal/homicidal thoughts to ensure mentors are aware of rules and regulations pertinent to circumstances that may arise during their peer mentoring work and are prepared to act accordingly.

Peer mentor supervision and support promotes peer mentor retention and enhances the likelihood that peer mentors will be successful in their mentoring efforts. Effective peer mentor supervision and support also provides an opportunity to support the growth and leadership development of the peer mentors themselves.

- Hold regular one-on-one meetings between staff supervisors and mentors for mentors to discuss their accomplishments and challenges or concerns regarding their mentees. These meetings should be developmentally-oriented and geared toward nurturing mentors' people skills, adaptability, and ability to complete administrative tasks, set boundaries, and provide support. {Suggested frequency = once a week for 30 minutes}

- Hold regular group meetings with all peer mentors to share announcements, talk about goals and activities for the upcoming week, and identify trends among mentees and brainstorm strategies to tackle emerging trends. Group mentor meetings allow for group dialogue, sharing examples of helping and challenging student mentees, and offer a community of support when mentors face difficult situations with their mentees. {Suggested frequency = once a week for an hour}

- Establish guidelines for mentors to keep a record of interactions with their peer mentees. Records should be kept in a place that is accessible to mentors and staff (i.e., shared online document or an online information system). The mentor staff supervisor should review the interactions recorded by mentors the previous week and then connect with mentors to coach them on how to best help students and what practices may be utilized to effectively support mentees.

- Prepare peer mentors for personal and professional growth by assisting them with incorporating peer mentoring experiences into their resumes, bringing in presenters to discuss various topics during peer mentor retreats and on-going professional development, and learning more about themselves with this mentorship opportunity.

Evaluation of the peer mentoring program offers an opportunity to reflect on current practice, make appropriate adjustments, and provide real-time guidance to peer mentors.

- Assess program structure at regular intervals through focus groups and surveys administered to mentees and mentors. Offer opportunities for group reflection on what is working well and what could be improved.

- Make timely adjustments in response to feedback to improve support to mentees and mentors during the subsequent academic term.

- Offer specific feedback to peer mentors on their strengths, accomplishments, and areas for improvement. Validate their growth and accomplishments and proactively offer resources to support their continued growth. Include concrete suggestions and examples for strengthening strategies to support mentees.

- Consider additional trainings and professional development opportunities to address emerging issues faced by mentors and mentees to ensure they are adequately prepared to support evolving student needs.

Institutional support is critical to the success and sustainability of a program.

- Ensure that key administrators are informed about the peer mentor program and work with them to secure funding for staff, mentors, and relevant peer mentor activities (e.g., professional development, mentor-mentee socializing opportunities, space for mentor-mentee community building).

- Connect with faculty to communicate about the peer mentoring program, inform them of the purpose of peer mentoring, what support the peer mentoring program provides, and solicit ideas and input as needed to inform the work of the peer mentors when relevant—particularly related to navigation of academic resources, challenges, and support.

- Collaborate with other programs and learning communities to share mentor training resources and best practices. Learn from other student support services and programs about what kind of support practices effectively increase at-promise student success to maximize investment of institutional resources in student success.

- Involve campus communications in highlighting the important work of the peer mentors to validate the work of the peer mentors and to normalize for mentees the use of peer mentors as a resource when navigating the college transition.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- How might peer mentoring foster the socioemotional and academic success of at-promise students on our campus? How might peer mentoring complement existing institutional efforts to increase retention and success? What existing campus resources and support could peer mentors amplify? And what new resources or supports are necessary?

- What types of mentees can we expect to participate in peer mentoring? How will we ensure peer mentoring is accessible to a diverse student population?

- How will we ensure that peer mentors reflect the diverse identities and experiences of mentee students? How will we get the word out when hiring new peer mentors to ensure a diverse and effective pool of applicants?

- What training will mentors receive prior to the program? How will we foster inclusivity and cultural competence? How will we support mentors during the program with regards to their role as mentors and their own personal growth? How frequently will we check in with them?

- How will the mentoring program be introduced to mentees? How will program staff and mentors convey a validating, identity-conscious and asset-based culture to mentees? What expectations and boundaries do mentors need to set with mentees?

- What will peer mentoring meetings entail? How frequently will peer mentors and mentees meet and for how long? Will peer mentors meet with mentees individually, in groups, or a combination of both?

- How will peer mentors track their interactions and progress? How will program staff offer feedback to peer mentors? How will program staff support peer mentors when their mentees struggle or are resistant to meeting?

- How will we support the personal, academic and professional growth of peer mentors?

- How will we cultivate a peer mentoring community? How/where can we designate space for the peer mentoring program?

- How will we measure the success of the program? How will we make timely adjustments to the program based on feedback?

- What institutional support do we have for the peer mentoring program? Who will provide funding for staff, mentors, and activities? What opportunities exist for collaboration with academic affairs and student affairs departments to support the peer mentoring program?

This brief is based on findings by the research team members of the *Promoting At-promise Student Success* (PASS) project (pass.pullias.usc.edu). This brief is informed by a longitudinal study conducted in partnership with the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), a set of programs providing at-promise students with a comprehensive array of academic, personal, and social support services. Students participate in two years of structured programming and receive a generous scholarship that covers the cost of tuition and fees in the University of Nebraska system. Our mixed methods study explored whether, how, and why the programs develop key psychosocial outcomes critical for at-promise student success such as sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy.

For the study that informed this brief, we collected longitudinal survey data from 786 at-promise students who participated in the TSLC peer mentoring program. This dataset included student background information (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, first-generation status) and psychosocial outcomes measured at the end of students' first year of college (e.g., belonging, mattering). We used multiple regression to estimate the relationship between at-promise students' peer mentoring engagement and psychosocial outcomes including sense of belonging, mattering, academic self-efficacy, and major and career self-efficacy. We also leveraged interview data from at-promise TSLC students who described their experiences with TSLC peer mentoring and its impact on their success. Two cohorts of students (N=83) participated in longitudinal, one-on-one interviews 2-3 times a semester over the course of 3 years, resulting in over 900 interviews. Interviews were semi-structured, lasted approximately 45-60 minutes each, and were recorded and transcribed. Interview data were analyzed using a combination of deductive and inductive coding.

Recommended citation

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NOTES

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5 Learn more about the TSLC program and study at https://pass.pullias.usc.edu/key-findings/

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14 Please visit https://pass.pullias.usc.edu/practice/ for more on creating validating relationships.