

**Project Title:** The Peer Success Coach Program

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**Category most strongly aligned to the project:** Student Services and Activities

**Criteria that best apply to the innovation:** Quality, Replication, Timeliness

**Project Summary:**

The Glendale Community College (GCC) Peer Success Coach (PSC) program was launched in spring 2022 to provide all incoming and continuing students with one-on-one holistic support as an effort to increase retention and develop a stronger sense of belonging at GCC. By identifying the best practices of the EXCEL Program, a previous student success program at GCC, we built our program off three pillars of support: connect to engage, refer to retain, and coach to achieve. Through the Mentor Collective (MC) platform we have not only created and facilitated meaningful matches between Peer Success Coaches and students based on the students' preferences but have also discovered that students who are matched in our coaching program demonstrate higher retention rates than those who are not.

**Project Description:** The COVID-19 pandemic changed the landscape of education. Our students have struggled with integrating into the traditional college experience compared to previous cohorts due to minimal resources, activities, and connections offered in-person. In 2022, Glendale Community College (GCC) faced a seemingly insurmountable hurdle of bringing students back to campus. The Peer Success Coach (PSC) program was developed to facilitate this transition back to in-person programming and support students holistically by offering the resources they need to accomplish their goals. The foundation of the PSC program was designed through the evidence-based practices identified from a previous student success program, EXCEL. With EXCEL's success, we identified that peer-to-peer support was a crucial component to the achievement of EXCEL scholars. Some students shared that their Peer Mentor was their primary connection to the EXCEL program and the reason they continued their education. Evaluations revealed that EXCEL scholars were likelier to have higher GPAs, complete their academic program(s), and successfully transfer upon graduation than non-EXCEL scholars. With this information, the PSC program was built upon three pillars of success: connect to engage, refer to retain, and coach to achieve. These pillars guide the PSC program in supporting new and continuing students academically, professionally, and personally. Coaches are tasked with facilitating connections between students and on or off-campus communities to help them build a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Coaches provide one-on-one coaching in areas that the students choose; whether that relates to academic success, professional development, or personal growth, students are supported in reaching both short and long term goals. We conducted a soft launch spring 2022 where 114 students connected with our Coaches. 81% of those students persisted and enrolled in fall 2022, in contrast to the 49.3% of students from our larger student body. When we initiated our full launch during the fall 2022/23 academic year we partnered with Mentor Collective (MC), a mentoring platform allowing students to sign-up and be paired with Peer Success Coaches based on important shared qualities directly identified by the students. These qualities include similarity in age, race, background, and major. Once matched, Coaches are invested in their students' success and serve as a person ready to listen, inspire, and help navigate challenges. Our initial goal was to match a total of 500 students with a Coach within the academic year. We've had a lot of interest in our program, matching and supporting 528 students. We exceeded our original goal of 500 student matches, and we aim to recruit 750 total students by the end of spring 2023. Each Coach is actively engaged with their students throughout the semester through one-on-one meetings, texts, and emails. According to MC, in similar programs 80% of communication occurs through texting with only 5% of communication occurring in-person. Within our program at GCC, we have 39% of our communication with students happening through texting, and 15% happening through in-person meetings. Overall we have 44% more conversations with our students on a personal level through in-person, video chat, and phone calls. Currently, 1,717 conversations have been logged by our Coaches, with a total of 8,699 peer-to-peer text messages sent since August. Our SMS relay is actually double the average of the MC benchmark. A variety of topics and Flags are discussed and documented during our conversations with students. Flags are concerns raised by students and reported by Coaches for additional support from campus services and leadership. Flag types include academic struggles, mental health concerns, housing or food insecurity, financial concerns, and an option

for “Other”. Resources are shared to connect students with the help they need, and the Program Coordinator follows up as needed. Cross-program data analysis from MC has found that students in mentorships with 3 or more conversations are significantly likelier to be retained than non-mentored students. Data collected by MC found that “GCC students are having more conversations with their Coaches than mentees in similar programs”. We currently have over 250 students that have spoken and/or met with a Coach 3 or more times this academic year. Our college-wide fall 2022 to spring 2023 retention rate is 63.7% while the PSC program’s fall-to-spring retention rate is 79.2%. The final piece of our program provides relevant programming to students. Every semester our program hosts a variety of events to engage our community and develop valuable skills. In fall 2022 we hosted four events. One of our events aimed to welcome students and foster a sense of community between first year students, returning students, and the Peer Success Coaches by playing various board games. Another event we hosted highlighted the challenges of entering higher education. We featured a student panel that addressed overcoming imposter syndrome, establishing communities and support systems, and finding resources to ease the college transition. This effort carried on in-between events as we were able to host workshops to help students apply for the Maricopa Foundation Scholarship on three separate occasions. Across fall 2022 our program was able to engage over 100 students at our events, all without a budget. Our success in connecting with so many students is due to our workshops being available to more than just our program participants; they are open to all GCC and Maricopa students. Most importantly, our events and workshops are applicable to the student body because these topics were directly identified as needs through the Peer Success Coaches own experiences. For some, talking to peers about challenges is easier than talking to someone of a higher status such as faculty or family members. Whether it is letting a student vent, helping a student create a plan for success, or finding resources and opportunities for students, Coaches are there to help. We know making sure our students feel connected and supported is crucial to their success and we are looking forward to seeing how these mentorships support efforts to increase overall rates of sense of belonging, retention, and completion.