



Building Student Connections in the Year of COVID:

Oklahoma State University

Executive Summary

The Mentor Collective (MC) peer mentorship program is one of Oklahoma State University (OSU)'s solutions implemented during the pandemic to ensure that first-year students developed a sense of connection with fellow students and the university. The program provides first-year students with a selected mentor trained to respond to the needs of incoming first-year students. Data shows significant engagement among mentees and mentors that helped smooth the transition of new students during this most challenging year.

Background

OSU, a land-grant institution, commits itself to accessibility for all students. To this end, it has many long-standing mentoring programs. These include:

- The Spears Business School's mentoring program, a program for sophomores, juniors, seniors, and business students from Watson Graduate School.
- The Housing and Residential Life Community Mentors program, which hires students to serve as peer mentors for all resident students. The mentors provide advocacy, intervention, mentorship, and support to their mentees.
- The University College mentorship program, a program that matches faculty mentors to student researchers. The mentors help students conduct a successful research project.

Each of these mentoring programs operates independently of the others; none are campus-wide programs.

When the university's Office of First-Year Success (FYS) opened in 2017, it was the university's first campus-wide initiative. The office helps welcome and support the close to 5,000 new students every year. In the summer of 2020, FYS launched the Mentor Collective (MC) program for all first-year students. This unique program complements the existing mentorship programs at the university.

Challenge

OSU closed its campus in the spring of 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure prevented incoming students from experiencing the usual in-person onboarding via OSU's on-campus Welcome Week. These students also missed out on the support offered by the Residence Life mentoring program. Forming relationships with fellow students would be challenging, and FYS anticipated that fear of losing personal connections would be a leading cause of anxiety. MC research has confirmed loss of connections as a heightened concern among college students during the pandemic.

In a non-pandemic situation, FYS would have spoken on campus to groups of students and their parents about programs promoting student connections. The MC program was a possible alternative for connecting these first-year students who would not benefit from this and other on-campus programs. But before committing to the MC program, FYS had to sell the idea to others on campus. Various groups might see this program as something that might overreach their influence over the university's independent units.

FYS invited 30 directors of student academic services to a meeting to discuss the MC program. They assured them that this program was an addition to, not a replacement of, existing mentorship programs. They detailed the significant benefits, such as [Insight Flags](#). This feature would enable mentors to alert FYS of their mentee's potential difficulties. They also assured the group that OSU would have full access to the MC data and that OSU could integrate MC data with other campus data for their research.

“Access to our raw data raised our comfort level considerably.”



Missy Wikle
Assistant Vice President for
Transition and Retention

Solution

The academic advisors and university leadership recognized the usefulness of the MC program, and FYS proceeded to launch the program during summer 2020. FYS met the MC staff and learned how to use the MC [Educator Dashboard](#). Also, with [content guidance from MC](#), they worked with OSU communications to develop a program launch plan.

Once interested students had been identified, MC administered surveys to learn about the students and used [research-driven algorithms--with human oversight--](#) to analyze responses. Then, they matched each incoming student with a mentor.

[MC gave significant support to the program participants](#). They trained and onboarded the mentors, and their platform offered discussion guides and goal-setting activities for mentors and mentees.

The MC Educator Dashboard generated real-time engagement tracking and reporting, including tracking Insight flags sent by mentors to FYS staff. These Insight Flags communicated major categories of issues mentees might be experiencing, such as homesickness, academic struggles, COVID-19 issues, or roommate problems. FYS staff reviewed these alerts, then pushed them out to academic advisors,

To help ensure peer-to-peer connections among first-year students, Assistant Vice President for Transition and Retention Missy Wikle and her team turned to Mentor Collective.

“I’m only where I am today because of mentorship. I was a first-generation college student on a full scholarship. Once I was in college, I relied on my peers to help guide my choices in classes, majors, everything. I ended up loving college and learning because of my peer and faculty mentors.”



Dr. Jeanette Mendez
Interim Provost of Academic Affairs

financial planning coaches, or campus connection coaches, as appropriate. The dashboard also tracked the number of shared phone calls, texts, and emails reported by mentors and mentees. MC analyzed the data collected on the dashboard and reported their findings at the middle and end of the program.

Conclusion

OSU surpassed its goal of 2,000 students, or half the incoming freshmen, participating in the MC program in fall 2020. This level of success, with 2,261 participants, surpassed what MC had predicted. In addition, 865 sophomores, juniors, and seniors signed on as mentors.

“One-hundred percent, Mentor Collective has been amazing to work with,” said Rae Ann Kruse, associate director of FYS. “I haven’t run into anyone yet that hasn’t been really devoted to assisting us”



Rae Ann Kruse
Associate Director of FYS

Large-Scale Mentorship at Oklahoma State University (Fall 2020-Spring 2021)

- 2,261 participants
- 9,521 reported conversations
- 226 Insight Flags submitted
- 93% of mentees persisted from the fall to spring semester vs. 89.95% of non-mentored students who continued
- 77.07% of mentored first-year students registered for the upcoming school year vs. 71.92% of non-mentored first-year students



Leading indicators from the fall semester through May point to MC having played a role in enhancing student success. The GPA of mentees averaged 3.13, while non-mentored students' GPAs averaged 3.11. The mentees completed 35.76 credits, compared to 34.94 completed by non-mentored students. Ninety-three percent of mentees persisted from the fall to spring semester vs. 89.95% of non-mentored students who continued. As of mid-May 2020, 77.07% of mentored first-year students had registered for the upcoming school year, vs. 71.92% of non-mentored first-year students. OSU anticipates that the indicators of MC impact will increase for 2021 when students return to campus and can meet in person with their mentors.

Data indicate that a significant number of mentors and mentees connected during the year. In all, there were 9,521 conversations self-reported on the MC platform by mentors and mentees. These conversations include phone calls, Zoom calls, texts, and email. FYS assumes that the number of actual conversations was higher because not all participants self-report their conversations.

As expected, the Insight Flag feature played a significant role in identifying potential problems among incoming students. As of May 2021, FYS had received 226 Insight Flags, with 210 deemed actionable. "Most mentor/mentee conversations took place in September and then tapered off," said Kruse, "which is what you want. You expect that as the students become more comfortable on campus they won't need their mentor as much, because now they know how to reach out to other people in clubs and organizations and res life."

"I want to volunteer because when I came to OSU, I had really good friends that came with me and helped me out my first year. I recognize that not everybody has that, and I want to help them find a home at OSU as much as I did my first year here."



Allison Metzger
Psychology major at
Oklahoma State University

"My mentor helped me find out more ways to get involved on campus!"



Ella Bingle
Sports media major at
Oklahoma State University

“The Insight Flags gave us a little bit more insight beyond the usual notices that we get, either from scholarships and financial aid or residential life or the academic side of the house. When it was something that the mentor felt was not a breach of confidence, they would put it into the MC platform. That rounded out our picture of the student.”

—Missy Wikle,
Assistant Vice President for
Transition and Retention