Effective Strategies for Scaling Near-Peer Mentoring Programs

AccelerateED

ESG | Education Strategy Group

Introduction

Students nationwide are experiencing a range of challenges as they attempt to apply for, enroll in, and complete a postsecondary degree or certificate. From shifting processes and applications, limited counselor and advisor access, and the evolving difficulties with accessing financial aid, students and their families are largely navigating the postsecondary transition maze alone. First-generation, low-income students, and students of color are struggling the most, with some estimates saying that approximately 89% of students from well-off families go to college compared to 51% of students from low-income families.[1]

This troubling statistic is motivating educators and non-profit leaders to find innovative ways to support students, with a particular focus on those students who rely heavily on their school for this navigational guidance. This reliance on the school for support can prove difficult for low-income and first-generation students, as recent data shows that the current average counselor-to-student ratio in high schools is 1:408, with caseloads at times reaching as high as 900 students.[2] At two-year colleges, the median caseload per full-time academic advisor is 441 students and 260 students at public four-year institutions,[3] leading to capacity constraints that perpetuate inequitable access to these critical support services for many students.

One innovative approach to improving access to high quality college and career planning support in high schools is through near-peer mentoring models. These programs enlist students further along in their educational journey as guides and mentors to support newer students, as well as provide targeted resources and guidance aimed at improving persistence. There are multiple approaches to structuring near-peer mentoring programs, with some employing recent college graduates, while others use current college students to support high school students. One organization that has seen impressive growth is the College Advising Corps (CAC). In this model, CAC places full-time college advisors in under-resourced high schools across the country. As of 2022, CAC has reached over 200,000 high school seniors and 71% of seniors submitted one or more college applications.[4]

A similar model is AdviseMI, an initiative hosted by the Michigan College Access Network. AdviseMI partners with 16 higher education institutions statewide to place recent college graduates in high schools with low college-going rates and provide near-peer advising to support students as they transition into postsecondary.

These models have been shown to be effective at advancing persistence and completion, as access to a trusted peer can have greater impact for high school students than more traditional adult support. The New York-based organization College Access and Research (CARA) found that its peer-to-peer advising programs resulted in a 19% increase in postsecondary enrollment in schools that offer year-round advising[5] Because these college student mentors have recent experience navigating the complex college admissions process, they are often well equipped to talk students through both the logistical components and the emotional barriers that come up when applying to and enrolling in a postsecondary institution.

For the purposes of this brief, we will focus on near-peer mentoring models that employ current college students to mentor high school students. We will discuss the core elements of high-quality near-peer mentoring programs, outline exemplar models, and bring attention to the critical need for institutional leaders to focus on replicability and scalability in the design and implementation of these programs.

What Makes a High-Quality Near-Peer Mentoring Program?

Near-peer mentoring programs can look quite different across contexts. The students who provide mentorship through these programs go by many names, such as navigational guides, alumni mentors, ambassadors, or advisors, and the services can be provided in a virtual space, entirely in person, or through a hybrid approach. What these programs all share is the commitment to providing paid, highly supported positions for college students to work directly with high schoolers as they plan for, apply to and enroll in a postsecondary institution. Programs that see the greatest impact for mentors and mentees adhere to the following best practices:

- **Hone the Social Capital Benefits**: Both the mentor and mentee experience a range of benefits as a result of participating in the program. For mentors, they experience improvement in college persistence and benefit from the increase in their social and cultural capital. For mentees,[6] working with a student who has recently gone through the process can boost their confidence in the college application process. For [7] underrepresented students in particular, connecting with someone who shares a similar background and has been successful gives them hope and fosters a sense of belonging.

- **Design a Clear Evidence-Based Framework**: Promising programs are grounded in a well-defined theory of change that outlines the expected outcomes and the detailed steps to achieve them. For example, CARA clearly outlines the inputs and outcomes in its peer-to-peer advising model,[8] providing a clear vision for how the program impacts students and systems. The CARA Theory of Change names both programmatic and peer leader outcomes and explicitly outlines the following inputs:
  - Peer leader training and development
  - Supervisor training and development
  - Development of relationships between leader and supervisor
  - High-quality support for students
  - Integration into school infrastructure

- **Develop Strong Onboarding and Support Mechanisms**: Strong near-peer mentoring programs provide robust onboarding and ongoing support for mentors and explicitly name the competencies and traits of effective mentors. This intentional design increases retention and improves the opportunity for coaching and professional growth for mentors. A recent report from University of Georgia highlights the benefits of robust onboarding, highlighting that mentors often find that the process enhances their own professional development.[9]

- **Use Data Strategically to Drive Outcomes**: Successful near-peer mentoring programs design thoughtful metrics that connect to measurable goals and realistically reflect regional data capacity. This thoughtful approach to data use allows program leaders to articulate their impact, assess the quality of program delivery, disaggregate data to assess the extent to which they are serving their target student populations, and make necessary changes in their programmatic approach to ensure high quality support for all students participating.

  CARA's College Bridge program offers a good example of this thoughtful use of data, offering support to high schools so that they can implement near-peer monitoring in their community. Through this model, a current college student is matched with a local high school, typically the same high school they attended. CARA supports the evaluation and assessment process, allowing them to track core data metrics and provide data-informed support to program leaders. CARA uses a single data system to draft consistent metrics across their programs, which has streamlined[10] their ability to run reports for individual schools and added capacity for counselors and coaches.

  To learn more about how regions and states are developing intentional, aligned data systems, read [Making the Connection](#).

Considerations for Establishing and Scaling a Near-Peer Mentoring Program

Strong examples of near-peer mentoring programs not only illustrate their transformative impact on students and mentors but also provide a clear roadmap for broader implementation. Replicability and scalability of programs offers greater impact to communities by providing a roadmap for others to adopt a comprehensive program (or elements of a program) with their own students. There are an array of strategies that have proven effective in growing the reach and impact of an institution's near-peer mentoring program:

- **Cultivate Regional Partnerships that Support Conditions for Scale:** Strategic collaboration across schools, colleges, community based organizations, and other stakeholders is essential for program expansion. These partnerships serve as the foundation for building capacity at the institutional level and support an institutions' ability to effectively scale a near-peer monitoring program, providing reach and sustainability. In addition to developing strong partnerships, all stakeholders must have a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities to ensure a cohesive, coordinated approach to program planning and implementation.

Example: The City University of New York

[CUNY's College and Career Bridge for All (Bridge)](#) includes collaborative, regional partnerships aimed at enhancing student engagement, belonging, and increasing the likelihood of enrollment in postsecondary for students in New York City (NYC). Through this program, which is the largest near-peer mentoring model nationwide, all high school seniors enrolled in NYC Public Schools receive college and career planning assistance from a bridge coach who is typically a currently enrolled CNY student. Bridge Coaches provide support aimed at reducing both "melt", or the phenomenon in which college-intending high school graduates do not go onto college in the months following their high school graduation or re-enroll in the spring semester.[11] In one CUNY study, Bridge reduced summer melt among participants by three percent when compared to a matched comparison group.[12] This model has served over 55,000 high school seniors in the city and is growing rapidly, providing a scalable model that is also cost effective at the low per-student fee of $73.

- **Explore Innovative Approaches to Sustaining Funding:** Effective programs leverage innovative funding streams to support this work, often sharing costs across institutions and investing in sustainable funding sources that decrease turnaround rates for mentors and create high quality program implementation.

Example: Kentucky Future Forward

Teach for America Appalachia in Kentucky has developed a program to support at-risk students by pairing recent college graduates with students from the same high school who are beginning their college and career planning journey with their Future Forward program. [Toyota Tsusho America](#) recently awarded $90,000 to Teach for America Appalachia's Future Forward Coaching program, showcasing how innovative they have been in identifying ongoing funding to support this work outside of a single organizational budget. This model trains coaches who are in their sophomore year or later in college to provide targeted support to current high school students, focusing on time management, accessing timely and customized support, and providing a source of hope and inspiration for students who might otherwise not apply to college. The model is closely aligned to the Federal TRIO framework, as many of the school districts leverage this federal program and wanted to ensure that the goals were intentionally connected to ensure cohesion for practitioners and students. Future Forward is currently operating in three schools across two counties and is planning to expand to additional schools in Kentucky and North Carolina given the positive impact for students who have participated in the programs.

- **Align to Clear Evidence-Based Frameworks and Measurable Outcomes:** Successful programs develop robust, evidence-based mechanisms to track and measure success, with clear metrics for both mentee and mentor outcomes and high quality data sources that allow for sharing impact across stakeholders. This focus on measurable outcomes creates conditions for buy-in and visibility, allowing the program to support more students at scale.

- **Design for Adaptability Based on Community Needs:** Successful programs are flexible and can be tailored to different contexts and populations while maintaining core principles. Programs that clearly outline what elements are customizable and what components are non-negotiable provide a clear roadmap for others attempting to implement a similar near-peer mentoring model with their students.

Example: Alliance College-Ready Public Schools

In 2012, the Alliance College-Ready Public Schools launched its Alliance Mentorship Program (AMP) to support student success. AMP matches college-bound high school graduates with alumni mentors attending the same university. Mentors guide incoming freshmen through the college experience, offering practical advice and emotional support. In recent years, AMP has supported 900 mentees across 12 colleges and universities, significantly reducing summer melt and increasing first-year persistence rates.[13] The program operates using a clear evidence-based framework and leverages evaluations to measure outcomes and inform practices. This data-driven approach extends to Alliance's school-based program decisions, utilizing transcript data from AMP participants to identify and address academic deficiencies. For instance, data on placements into remedial college coursework prompted a few schools to introduce new preparatory classes in math and English, helping seniors perform better on college placement exams and avoid non-credit remedial courses. Mentors also collect progress data on their mentees and collaborate with the Alliance High School Student Transition Coordinator to provide tailored support so that struggling students receive referrals to appropriate services.

Example: Matriculate

Matriculate is a national non-profit organization that has taken the near-peer advising work to a virtual setting, providing juniors and seniors in high school with a dedicated mentor who is a current undergraduate to support them over the course of 18 months as they apply to and enroll in college. Matriculate prioritizes a program model that allows them to articulate impact and ensure a consistent experience for mentors and mentees, while allowing mentors to customize their approach to meet each high school student where they are. These mentors join a national network of peers, obtain critical leadership skills and grow their network through structured onboarding and guidance from the Matriculate team. The data shows that 95% of Matriculate students persist in college,[14] compared to the national average of 77%.[15] This model of providing near-peer advising virtually is highly cost effective for institutions and for students who qualify, as the resources are provided free of cost, making this an equitable and accessible option for students nationwide that is adaptable based on the students being served and the needs of the community.

Summary

Near-peer mentoring programs provide a scalable, effective method for increasing capacity across strained education systems and address common challenges such as shifting processes and applications, limited counselor and advisor access and the evolving challenges with accessing financial aid. Both mentors and mentees in near-peer mentoring programs benefit from enhanced social capital, increased academic outcomes, a boost in self-confidence, improved employability skills, and expanded social networks. In order to leverage their impact, regional leaders should prioritize scalability and replicability of these near-peer models, developing sustainable, diverse funding streams and programmatic policies that drive equitable impact and expansion of these programs. The benefits that near-peer mentoring offers to students are considerable. The challenge for school and community leaders pursuing near-peer mentoring will be to create programs that improve student outcomes and can sustainably provide impact at scale.

APPENDIX: Key Design Considerations[16]

There are numerous decision points when institutional leaders are designing near-peer mentoring programs. While this list is not intended to be exhaustive, it highlights high-level categories that are important to consider and provides key reflection questions to ensure a strategic, replicable plan for implementation.

Program Design

- Who recruits near-peer mentors?
- How will you determine the compensation for mentors?
- How will you structure the matching process for mentors and mentees?
- How will you assess the capacity and commitment of the potential mentor to ensure retention?
- Do you expect mentors to meet with mentees in person? Remotely?
- How frequently will you expect mentors to meet with their mentees?
- What guardrails will you include to ensure student safety?
- How will you assess when it is appropriate to end the mentor relationship?

Data Collection and Continuous Improvement

- What student level data do near-peer mentors and their supervisors need access to?
- What metrics are the institution(s) using to define success? How will you measure those?
- Are there data sharing agreements you need to develop or sustain to ensure adequate data access for all adults involved in supporting the student?
- What kinds of information do you need to collect for mentees and how often to ensure you have adequate information for each mentee?
- What types of feedback will mentors receive and from whom?

Training and Onboarding

- Who develops the training materials?
- What kinds of training do mentees need to ensure they understand the process and benefits?
- What is the role of school staff in supervising and supporting mentors?
- How will you communicate the benefits to both mentors and mentees?
- What type of screening is necessary in the recruitment phase for new mentors?

Notes

1. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/college-enrollment-gaps-how-academic-preparation-influences-opportunity/#FN2
2. https://caranyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023TripleImpactReport.pdf
3. https://caranyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023TripleImpactReport.pdf
4. https://collegeadvisingcorps.org/why-college-advising-corps/our-impact/
5. https://caranyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023TripleImpactReport.pdf
6. https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/the-dual-impact-of-near-peer-counseling-on-student-success/
7. https://blog.collegevine.com/12-benefits-of-near-peer-mentorship
8. https://caranyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CARA%E2%80%94PeerToPeerModel-TheoryOfChange.pdf
9. https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/2957
10. https://www.grouptrail.com/case%20studies/2018/12/01/cara-uses-enroll-to-track-the-college-process-for-more-than-5000-students/
11. https://www.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/evaluation/publications-presentations/2017-CB4A-Impact-Assessment.pdf
12. https://www.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/page-assets/about/administration/offices/evaluation/publications-presentations/2017-CB4A-Impact-Assessment.pdf
13. https://www.laalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/AllianceMentorshipProgram_Report_03_05_18.pdf
14. https://matriculate.org/impact/
15. https://nscresearchcenter.org/persistence-retention/#:~:text=Overview,68.2%20percent%20(%2B1.0pp).'
16. See the MENTOR report on "Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring" for additional suggestions on recommended elements of youth mentoring programs.

Acknowledgement

About Accelerate ED

The Accelerate ED communities are cross-sector partnerships spanning K-12, higher education institutions, workforce actors at the city, county and state level, and community-based organizations. These teams, facilitated by a regional intermediary, demonstrate a commitment to racial and socioeconomic equity in opportunity and outcomes for all students, have prior experience implementing pathways models in their region, and use data to inform improvement. This brief highlights the work of two sites in the Accelerate ED community, Michigan College Access Network and Kentucky's Future Forward Program.