

Transforming Access into Success: The Impact of Collaboration & Outreach

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Peer-mentorship is a vital component of any college student's educational and professional development. You can find a peer-mentorship system within several departments and programs at various higher education institutions. At Sam Houston State University (SHSU), a Minority-Serving Institution that has an enrollment of more than 50% of undergraduate student population who identify as first-generation, it is imperative to establish peer-services in departments and offices to foster a sense of academic and inclusive excellence for students from underserved communities. Furthermore, it is also critical to promote post-undergraduate pathways for students from this demographic. While many students will select to pursue a career in the workforce, others will learn more about graduate-level degrees and will elect to pursue an advanced degree. By enrolling in a graduate program, these students reinstate their identity as underserved students, resulting in a greater need to provide additional resources, including peer-mentorship. Collaboration and Outreach, a department in the Division of Academic Affairs at SHSU, has two support programs, SH ELITE and ASPIRE, that provide retention services for undergraduate and graduate students. Both programs include, but are not limited to, students from underserved populations. SH ELITE, Establishing Leadership In & Through Education, is an undergraduate student support program that is designed to support and empower students from various backgrounds to achieve academic and personal success in college. The ASPIRE Program is a student support program for graduate students designed to provide community and support for students pursuing a master's degree. Both programs provide personal, professional, and academic support through many services. Readers will gain knowledge about how the Department of Collaboration and Outreach works to ensure that students persist and graduate from the institution, all while thriving in co-curricular learning.

Keywords: peer-mentorship, student success, underserved, student retention, academic affairs

Introduction

Institutions such as Sam Houston State University (SHSU), that attract many historically underserved populations, recognize the importance of resources and services to assist these students with navigating the college landscape. One of many resources at SHSU is the Department of Collaboration & Outreach, which was established to address the needs of these students through various services. The department is aligned with several components in the university's strategic plan including eliminating achievement gaps, career readiness, as well as academic and inclusive excellence. Two initiatives, ELITE and ASPIRE, were specifically designed to provide intentional programming that supports students from these various groups, including, first-generation (undergraduate and graduate), Pell-eligible, and transfer students.

The Department of Collaboration & Outreach's mission is to bridge gaps in student success by fostering meaningful relationships amongst internal stakeholders. To obtain this goal, the department's staff takes a comprehensive approach to student

development. They recognize that student retention and persistence are not only related to a student's academic performance but to their co-curricular experience. By embedding various components into ELITE and ASPIRE, staff ensure that students in these programs receive guidance and support towards continued success.

Literature Review

Minority-Serving Institutions continue to actively seek ways to increase their success in attracting and retaining students, as well as successfully facilitating students' education (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005). Drastic changes in the demographics of college students have required institutions to implement more student support services through programs that offer students' networking opportunities, personal development, and academic support. These individuals are more likely than their white counterparts to be low-income, academically disadvantaged, and first-generation college students who may have otherwise been denied access to higher education (2005). To address

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the needs of the various demographics on college campuses, institutions have embraced peer mentoring within student support services.

There is considerable evidence of the use of student support programs with peer-mentorship components to improve student experiences of higher education (Simpson et al., 2023). For undergraduate students, mentoring by peers can enhance persistence and their enculturation into the university setting (Reeves et al, 2023). At the graduate level, peer mentoring has been shown to increase social support, career readiness, retention, and graduation rates among first-year students (2022). As a result of engaging in peer mentorship, students are exposed to experiences and resources which can assist in a smooth transition between undergraduate and graduate education, resulting in institutional enrollment and retention (Liu et al., 2022). Although some peer mentoring relationships will develop naturally throughout students' academic careers, it has been suggested that the pairing assignments should be established formally (Girard & Musielak, 2012). Peer mentorship is expected to include a strong working alliance, high levels of social support, and, ideally, a transformational relationship where the mentor inspires and motivates their mentee (Orsini, 2023). DeRossett et al. (2024) posit that additional support, particularly support for first-year first-generation students, increases student engagement and well-being on campus. According to Bettinger et al. (2013), students participating in support programs that aid students in feeling academically capable and connected to their institution are more likely to persist. Furthermore, literature also implies that students are awarded a sense of belonging on campus and a reciprocal experience associated with student retention, exhibiting positive outcomes (Todd, 2023).

According to Schneider (2022), retention equates to success in higher education. Yet, issues of belonging are particularly salient during major transitions, and evidence indicates that underserved and first-generation students face added barriers to finding a sense of belonging (Winograd & Rust, 2014; Musius & Ting-Han, 2021). As a result, underserved students often struggle academically or socially in college due to the lack of belonging at an institution. A sense of belonging is a construct that has been identified as a factor in promoting college well-being (Peoples et al., 2024). According to Jeanmougin et al. (2021), a mentoring program demonstrates effectiveness in increasing a sense of belonging. The effectiveness of mentoring for students increases the longer students are exposed to mentoring programs (Byrd & Mason, 2021). Therefore, addressing this hurdle is eminent, and more institutions should implement student programs with a mentorship component that is structured and intentional in nature to ensure

underserved students are not only retained but receive adequate support.

ELITE & ASPIRE Programs

The ELITE, Establishing Leadership In and Through Education, program was established in 2010 to help increase the retention and graduation rates of Black and Brown men at the institution. In 2023, the program was redesigned to assist with the institution's retention goals for all students, regardless of race or gender. ELITE provides a comprehensive framework that combines academic success and leadership development. This initiative, which solely serves undergraduate students, provides multiple services for program participants including academic resources such as free scantrons and calculators, as well as engagement opportunities through socials and a lounge space that is open throughout the week.

Throughout their time in the ELITE program, discussions of life post-undergraduate are often prompted. Some students in the program make plans to enter a career, and others seek to further their education by pursuing a master's degree. Student testimonials of their experiences with ELITE assert that one of the many reasons they decided to continue their education at SHSU for a master's degree was due to peer relationships gained while in the program. These students that continue, reinstate their identity as underserved students in their graduate program. Being that the academic curriculum for graduate education is much more rigorous than undergraduate education, the transition can be challenging, especially for underserved students. Thus, a program for graduate student success is necessary.

The ASPIRE Program is a student support program for masters-level graduate students, regardless of their academic track. The program's mission is to provide students with the tools necessary to smoothly adjust to the academic rigor of graduate education and acquire the appropriate knowledge and training to smoothly transition from student to professional. To meet the needs of its participants, the ASPIRE program focuses on three core areas for graduate student success: personal development, professional development, and academic development.

Peer Mentorship

While there are many benefits from being involved in the ELITE and ASPIRE Programs, one of the core components of each program is its peer mentoring. The mentorship program emphasizes the importance of academic achievement, belonging, and career readiness. Comprised of two groups, peer mentors and mentees, peer mentors in ELITE are selected upperclassmen who

have demonstrated good academic performance and leadership at the university. To excel in their role, peer mentors partake in semesterly training where they are equipped with critical skills related to guiding, supporting, and advocating for their mentees.

During training, ELITE peer mentors prepare to lead weekly small group meetings during the fall and spring semesters. Unlike the common one-to-one peer mentor-mentee pairing, the ELITE Program organizes peer mentor groups with a one-to-many foundation. Small group topics include guidance on time-management, mental health and wellness, financial literacy, and campus engagement. These topics are important for most students, especially as they navigate the complexity of higher education. In addition to leading small groups, mentors also assist ELITE's professional staff with case management. An academic alert program has been embedded to intervene early in the academic semester for students who are not off to a great start. The peer mentors facilitate one-on-ones with mentees in their small group who have an early academic alert to assist them with any accommodations, resources, or services needed. This component of the mentoring program serves as an accountability method for the mentees.

When transitioning into the ASPIRE Program, the peer mentorship experience becomes more individualized with a one-to-one pairing system. To ensure effectiveness, ASPIRE peer mentors complete the DiSC leadership assessment, develop mentee expectations, and review different scenarios of mentor-mentee interactions during their peer mentor training. The DiSC Leadership Assessment is a personality test that supports leaders to identify and understand their leadership style and the way it impacts their teamwork, communication, and productivity. Classified as second-year graduate students, this is vital at this stage of development to ensure peer mentors fully step into their role as leaders and develop strategies to effectively support their mentees as future professionals.

With the one-to-one pairing, peer mentors are required to submit an accountability write-up reflecting on the meeting's discussion and experience. This accountability write-up not only allows program staff to track the peer mentor experiences but sets the intention for meetings. Questions on the accountability write-up include: what was discussed, what improvements are needed as a leader, and what was learned as a leader?

Peer Mentee

Being a mentee in the program offers students a transformative opportunity to engage in a supportive community. ELITE mentees consist of students from all classifications (freshmen -

seniors), and they actively choose to participate in the program. Several students find small groups to be beneficial in their quest to foster a sense of belonging on campus. ELITE utilizes a self-select design where mentees determine their small group based on their cohort (classification) and availability. Small groups are offered Monday through Thursday at various times throughout the day, providing flexibility to meet students' needs. Students have the opportunity to meet with their peer-mentor and small groups for eight weeks in the fall and spring term.

Beyond small groups, these students are also given the opportunity to attend social events promoting peer engagement. Additionally, ELITE provides exclusive leadership development opportunities through ELITE Exchange. This event is hosted at least twice a semester and provides mentees with valuable insight from SHSU faculty, staff, and alumni who are thriving in their careers. The experiences that ELITE mentees receive are vital to their development as college students. Mentees are reminded of the advocates that they have on campus, and the program provides an opportunity to build meaningful relationships among peers. ELITE has established a foundation for undergraduate students to learn from their peers. Through engagement, several mentees become inspired and often seek ways to replicate the actions of their mentors, resulting in more academic and professional success.

Similarly, ASPIRE mentees have found the peer mentor experience to be beneficial for their personal, professional, and educational development. Being that several ELITE students transition into the ASPIRE Program, many of the students who participate in both programs are already well connected to one another. The program's partnership aids in a scholar's seamless transition from the one-to-many mentor framework to the one-to-one framework, ultimately strengthening their peer mentorship experience once enrolled in ASPIRE as a scholar. While only required to attend two meetings a semester, many meet more times throughout the semester and forge friendships outside of the mentor-mentee interactions. Similar to peer mentors, peer mentees must submit an accountability write up after each meeting. Questions on the accountability write-up for peer mentees include: what was discussed, what was learned, and what do you have to put into action from what you have learned? Along with the write-up, they are also required to upload a photo with their submission. This results in the mentee developing a strong connection to the institution as a graduate student and prospering towards success. After a year, mentees prepare to take on the role as mentor and continue the cycle of supporting their fellow peers to success.

Outcomes

While the ELITE and ASPIRE Programs are considered to address and impact the student's college experience, there are implications. Institutional shifts and advancements resulted in both programs restructuring within the last year. Therefore, data is minimal. Assessment for current practices is actively being collected, and data will not be available until fall 2025.

Limitations

A limitation about the ELITE Program, specifically, is its free-will and opt-in structure. Excited at the beginning of the semester and eager to get involved on campus, approximately 650 students expressed interest in the program during the 2024-2025 academic year. Despite having a high number of interested students, only 250 students enrolled in the program this academic year. As a result, the program's staff is assessing ways to enroll more students that express interest, and opportunities to increase engagement.

A limitation about the ASPIRE Program, specifically, is its participation capacity being 25 due to funding. With almost 3000 graduate students at SHSU, this limits the institutional impact the program can have on the graduate student body.

Results

Despite the limitations, each program's participant academic persistence at SHSU is more than 90 percent. At the end of Fall 2024, a contact campaign was conducted to encourage and assist ELITE scholars with Spring 2025 registration. The campaign resulted in findings for 10 students, including seven students who did not enroll after fall 2024 and 3 being placed on academic probation. As a result, the ELITE Program had a 94.67 percent fall-to-spring persistence rate. For the ASPIRE Program, students are required to submit their course schedules to track persistence and ensure programming aligns with the group's schedule. As a result, the ASPIRE Program had a 100 percent fall-to-spring persistence rate.

Conclusion

From bachelor's to master's, peer mentorship has proven to be impactful for student success and well-being. Readers learn how the Collaborative and Outreach Department at Sam Houston State University encourages college student's enrollment, retention, and completion of a bachelor's and master's degree. Through the ELITE and ASPIRE Program, students are awarded transformational interactions, improved institutional experiences, and educational success.

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