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From Patchwork to Purpose: Creating a Unified Mentoring Framework Across Student Affairs

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Inclusive Student Mentoring

Peer mentoring is widely recognized as a powerful strategy for student engagement, development, and persistence in higher education. However, inconsistent implementation across departments can lead to disparities in training, equity, and student experience. At Northern Arizona University (NAU), the Inclusive Student Mentoring initiative unifies several mentoring programs under a single Student Affairs framework. These include First-Generation Programs, the Office of Inclusion, the Office of Indigenous Student Success, Peer Jacks Mentoring, State-wide Jacks Mentoring, and Transfer Jacks Mentoring. While these programs offer specialized support, their fragmentation has limited their collective impact. This paper explores NAU's transition from a decentralized mentoring structure to a centralized, equity-centered model. The initiative emphasizes common recruitment, training, developmental goals, and equitable practices rooted in wellbeing and belonging. Outcomes of this transformation are discussed in the context of student retention and institutional cohesion.

Keywords: Peer mentoring, student retention, equity in higher education, mentor training, cross-departmental collaboration

Introduction

Baumgartner et al. (2019) highlight both the benefits and complexities of peer mentoring in higher education, noting the necessity of aligning mentoring competencies with structured training. They assert that the mentoring relationship is not inherently effective without intentional design, training, and reflection. Beras (2018) supports this notion through the lens of first-year student transition, identifying the first six weeks as critical for fostering a sense of belonging, identity affirmation, and campus connection.

Literature Review

Collier (2017) articulates peer mentoring as a high-impact practice, grounded in the dual roles of academic and psychosocial support. He also emphasizes the importance of social learning, where mentors model successful student behavior and mentees learn through observation and guided practice. Tinto (2024) revisits his foundational theory of student departure, stressing that persistence is largely influenced by students' academic and social integration. He advocates for programs that emphasize meaningful connections and a sense of mattering.

Boda et al. (2020) provide compelling evidence that social network interventions among university students have both short- and long-term benefits in increasing social capital and friendships, key components of wellbeing. Similarly, Perna and Leigh (2020) argue that equitable access to well-structured programs, such as mentoring, contributes to efficiency in resource use and broader success outcomes, especially for underrepresented students.

Together, this scholarship informs the present case study of NAU's Inclusive Student Mentoring framework, which addresses training inconsistencies, professional development disparities, and the need for structured, equitable experiences for peer mentors and mentees. To guide this transformation, the initiative drew from several key frameworks. Tinto's (2024) Model of Student Retention provided a lens for understanding how integration into both academic and social communities directly impacts persistence. Social learning theory underscored the importance of peer modeling, and observation framing mentoring as a relational learning process. The College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA)) – Saenz et al. (2021) standards outline structured training requirements for peer educators, including competencies in communication, ethics, and learning strategies. These standards ensure consistency and quality across peer mentoring programs. The CRLA standards offered structure and accountability ensuring mentoring practices were grounded in nationally recognized competencies. These theories collectively served as the philosophical backbone for building a cohesive, equity-driven model that centers student belonging, peer mentor development, and institutional outcomes.

Designing with Purpose: Creating Consistency across Programs

Creating a unified peer mentoring framework required more than good intentions. It demanded a deliberate shift from isolated departmental efforts to a shared, equity-centered strategy. While research and theory provided the foundation, the work of designing consistent tools, practices, and expectations across diverse programs required cross-departmental collaboration and a commitment to student-centered outcomes This section outlines how the Inclusive Student Mentoring initiative at NAU translated guiding principles into actionable structures that support both mentors and mentees, regardless of their program affiliation.

The vision for Inclusive Student Mentoring centered on creating a unified student experience across all peer mentoring programs. While each department serves a unique population, all programs are grounded in shared values of equity, belonging, and student development. These values informed every design decision, from the training peer mentors receive to the goals of each mentoring conversation. The commitment to identity development and culturally responsive support ensured that students with multiple, intersecting identities would receive consistent and inclusive experiences, no matter which program they entered through.

Inclusive Student Mentoring Program

To bring this vision to life, Inclusive Student Mentoring introduced tools designed to promote consistency and clarity. These included conversation templates for mentor meetings, annual student checklists to guide engagement, and adaptable planning documents to help departments outline learning outcomes and key milestones. These tools were not only practical, but intentional responses to the inconsistencies that had hindered equitable support. They created a foundation that peer mentors could rely on and that supervisors could use to build structure, provide feedback, and reinforce expectations.

The model was built around five "Big Ideas" that emerged from both the research and lived experiences of peer mentors:

- Shared Divisional Goals: Establishing a common purpose for mentoring across programs promoted cohesion and reduced siloed operations. A shared vision helped mentors understand their impact, regardless of departmental affiliation, and supported more fluid collaboration between staff.
- Timely and Purposeful Mentoring Structures: Programs previously varied in how peer mentors reached out and conducted meetings. Standardizing practices such as meeting scripts and reporting templates helped ensure accountability and elevated the quality of each student interaction.
- Engagement Activities: Beyond structured meetings, informal social connections were prioritized. Shared events helped build community among peer mentors and mentees and supported early student integration, which research identifies as critical for long-term success.
- Training and Professional Development: Equipping both peer mentors and full-time staff with equitable, skills-based training ensured alignment and role clarity. When training followed divisional standards, mentors reported increased confidence, stronger commitment, and deeper connections with students.
- Assessment-Driven Results: Rather than being viewed as punitive, assessment tools were framed as opportunities for growth and refinement. Programs that embraced data collection were able to make informed changes that directly benefited student outcomes and peer mentor development.

Throughout the design process, the Inclusive Student Mentoring team focused on balancing structure with flexibility. While the tools and goals were standardized, departments retained the ability to tailor delivery methods and cultural practices to best serve their populations. This flexible standardization allowed for innovation without sacrificing consistency, creating a mentoring ecosystem that could evolve while staying aligned with core values.

Bringing the Framework to Life Strategies and Challenges in Implementation

Turning a unified peer mentoring vision into a functioning framework required more than creating tools and defining values. It involved navigating competing priorities, department-level constraints, and cultural resistance to change. Implementing Inclusive Student Mentoring across Student Affairs at NAU required ongoing collaboration, strategic flexibility, and persistent advocacy for equity.

Results

Three major challenges shaped the initial rollout. These challenges were identified through peer mentor feedback surveys, supervisor interviews, and a review of departmental practices conducted during the initial planning phase. First, there was inconsistency in staff supervision practices across departments. Some peer mentors had structured, consistent one-on-one meetings with supervisors, while others went weeks without meaningful check-ins. This inconsistency not only impacted peer mentor engagement but also contributed to confusion around role expectations and diminished accountability.

Second, training varied widely based on each supervisor's comfort level and departmental resources. Some peer mentors were well-prepared to handle sensitive disclosures or complex student concerns, while others were left to rely on peers or the full-time staff for guidance. One peer

mentor reported freezing during a conversation when a student shared a traumatic experience, unsure how to proceed. These inconsistencies jeopardized both the peer mentor's confidence and the mentee's trust.

Third, the mentee experience was uneven across programs. This was informed by cross-program peer mentor debriefs and student feedback collected during end-of-semester evaluations. Structured activities, such as the 'Personal Values' conversation, a guided dialogue designed to help students reflect on their core beliefs and how they influence academic and social choices. Activities like this were offered in some programs but absent in others. When mentees saw what peers in other programs were doing, it raised questions and, at times, created dissatisfaction. This highlighted the need for shared tools and consistent expectations to ensure quality regardless of entry point.

To respond to these challenges, the Program Manager of Inclusive Student Mentoring introduced several strategies. The most critical was centralizing key functions such as peer mentor recruitment, onboarding, and training. At the time of implementation, the Inclusive Student Mentoring team consisted solely of the Program Manager, who led all aspects of the initiative; from framework design and tool development to training, assessment, and cross-departmental coordination. This allowed departmental full-time staff to focus more on peer mentoring supervision and student connection.

Cross-departmental planning meetings, held monthly, helped surface program-specific concerns while reinforcing shared goals. These conversations were essential in reducing resistance and building relationships between departments that had previously operated independently. Implementation was approached with flexibility. Departments could adopt tools and trainings in ways that fit their own structures, as long as they met core requirements. This approach created space for innovation while maintaining accountability.

The foundational peer mentor training course became a cornerstone of the model. Offered division-wide, it ensured that all mentors, regardless of department, entered their roles with shared language, values, and skill sets. Drawing on Beras' (2018) emphasis on early engagement, this course provided an immediate sense of belonging and competence, helping peer mentors build rapport with mentees from the start.

Staff turnover and limited budgets created persistent obstacles. To address financial disparities, centralized recruitment and training reduced duplicated costs. To mitigate the impact of staff transitions, onboarding plans and documentation were standardized to ensure continuity even when new staff needed time to acclimate. In cases where staff avoided taking ownership of persistent issues, the Inclusive Student Mentoring team used assessment data collected from our meeting notes database and student feedback to refocus the conversation on impact and outcomes.

Although resistance remained in some areas, the shift toward centralization gained momentum as departments began to see tangible benefits. Reduced workload, improved peer mentor satisfaction, and more consistent student feedback helped make the case. Over time, more staff moved from passive compliance to active engagement.

Discussion

Outcomes and Impact Strengthening Student Success through Mentoring

The transformation of peer mentoring across Student Affairs at NAU is more than a structural change. It represents a cultural and relational shift that is producing measurable results. From enhanced student retention to the emergence of emotionally intelligent student leaders, the Inclusive Student Mentoring framework has begun to show its impact on the wellbeing and success of students, peer mentors, and staff alike.

Quantitative Impact

Peer mentor training outcomes show clear signs of progress. In Spring 2024, fifty-eight peer mentors completed the New Mentor Training, and in Spring 2025, that number rose to sixty-nine. These trainings not only built consistency but also increased peer mentor confidence by incorporating reflective opportunities that allowed students to identify skill gaps and request scenario-based training (Collier, 2017; Galamiton et al., 2024).

Engagement and retention data reinforce the effectiveness of the new model. Across all Inclusive Student Mentoring programs, peer mentors engaged with 1,709 unique students during the 2024-2025 academic year. Of these, 1,242 participated in recurring mentoring sessions and were classified as "active participants." Among these active participants, 987 students enrolled for their second year at NAU, resulting in a 79.5 percent retention rate, an encouraging indicator of the model's impact (Tinto, 2024).

Peer mentors also logged 8,489 total interactions with students, demonstrating the consistency and depth of connection being fostered throughout the year. The structure and intentionality of the peer mentoring model contributed to this high engagement level, aligning with research showing that developmental mentoring and social learning promote persistence and social capital (Boda et al., 2020; Galamiton et al., 2024).

Qualitative Outcomes

Peer mentor reflections reveal that this work is not just operational, it is transformational. Themes from peer mentor surveys demonstrate a deeper understanding of mentoring as a purposeful and emotionally resonant experience. Peer mentors articulated a clear sense of their personal "why," viewing their role not simply as task-based but

as meaningful work tied to purpose, healing, and identity (Murrar et al., 2020).

Peer mentors described moments where they helped peers feel seen and safe, emphasizing that small acts such as listening, checking in, or just being present had lasting impact. One mentor shared how supporting a student through a panic attack in a quiet moment on campus reminded them that mentoring is "emotional safety work," not just academic support. Others reflected on shared struggles, such as being from small towns or navigating the challenges of being a first-generation student, which shaped their drive to serve (Collier, 2022).

These stories reflect the development of mentors as values-driven leaders. Their reflections consistently tied personal identity to institutional goals like student retention and inclusion, and they recognized that belonging is built through small, intentional moments (Murrar et al., 2020; Tinto, 2024).

Cultural Shifts in Peer Mentoring

The new peer mentoring model also led to a visible cultural shift within Student Affairs. Departments have become more collaborative and consistent in how they approach peer mentoring, expressing appreciation for having peer mentors who are well-prepared and ready to step into their roles with confidence. Peer mentors themselves are engaging in deeper, more intentional ways. Of the sixty-four peer mentor reflections reviewed, fifty-nine emphasized the importance of community, shared responsibility, and inclusion (Collier, 2017).

While direct references to mentor-to-mentor support were limited, the emergence of collective language such as "we" and "our department" suggests a growing sense of unity and team identity. Social connection may still be developing, but peer mentors clearly understand that emotional safety and inclusive culture are essential parts of their work (Murrar et al., 2020).

Sustainability and Remaining Challenges

To ensure the long-term success of the model, several structural supports have been introduced. Regular planning meetings allow departments to anticipate mentoring cycles, review feedback, and adjust training based on emerging needs. A habit of reflective practice is being embedded through tools that help full-time staff and peer mentors identify trends and areas for improvement (Perna & Leigh, 2020).

Still challenges remain. Some staff continue to resist change, clinging to legacy practices or fearing loss of autonomy. The Program Manager has addressed these concerns through one-on-one meetings that emphasize understanding, identify best practices already in use, and invite departments to shape how the model evolves. Turnover is another ongoing challenge. When staff leave, supervision gaps often result in peer mentors receiving less support, which can affect the quality of student experience. Addressing this requires continued investment in training, documentation, and systems that maintain continuity even during periods of transition (Tinto, 2024; Perna & Leigh 2020).

Lessons Learned and Conclusion

Over the course of building a unified peer mentoring model at NAU, several key lessons emerged. The most critical was the need for flexibility. While the Program Manager was ready to launch the model quickly, adoption required time, trust, and a deep understanding of departmental priorities. It took nearly two years to move from initial conversation to full implementation. This process revealed the importance of allowing departments to progress at their own pace and emphasized that relational groundwork is essential for sustainable change.

Equally important was learning how to frame the effort. Instead of focusing solely on student outcomes, the Program Manager prioritized messaging that highlighted how collaboration could reduce staff workload and streamline efforts. This strategic approach helped secure buy-in from departments that were initially hesitant. As Perna & Leigh (2020) noted, efficiency and resource-conscious practices are often more persuasive in institutional contexts than abstract ideals alone.

Several surprises emerged throughout implementation. Peer mentors expressed strong appreciation for a unified training experience that gave them structure, clarity, and shared language. They also showed a deep desire to connect in real life, beyond the digital platforms used for training. These responses affirmed findings by Boda et al. (2020), who demonstrated that peer-led, in-person social networks can foster lasting friendships and community cohesion. It became clear that building a peer mentoring model requires attending to both technical systems and the emotional and relational needs of those involved.

If this process were to be repeated, it would begin with more intentional relationship-building. One-on-one conversations with staff, directors, and peer mentors would help surface existing strengths and clarify each department's "why." Starting with shared values, rather than directives, could accelerate alignment and reduce resistance. As Tinto (2024) argues persistence is rooted not just in institutional design, but in meaningful connection and belonging.

For institutions looking to replicate this model, there are three critical insights to consider. First, define a shared purpose rooted in values like student success and equity. Collaboration should never be performative or driven by optics; it should reflect authentic alignment. Second, map the existing landscape before proposing changes. Understand what each department is already doing well and identify overlaps that could be streamlined. Third, create a culture of reciprocity, not hierarchy. As Galamiton et al,. (2024) explain, students and staff thrive in systems where learning is collaborative, and empowerment is mutual.

This model is worth scaling because it centralizes core peer mentoring functions in a way that increases flexibility, reduces duplication, and makes space for innovation. Shared hiring, training, and development processes for peer mentors not only reduce costs but also free departments to invest in other student-centered initiatives. By connecting programs through a common framework, the model ensures that peer mentoring experiences are consistent, high-quality, and rooted in best practices.

In addition to structural gains, this model challenges departments to reconsider tradition for tradition's sake. Too often, peer mentoring efforts persist simply because they have always existed. The Program Manager plays a crucial role in supporting departments to reflect on their goals, try innovative approaches, and connect with colleagues across campus and beyond. As Collier (2022) notes peer mentoring is most impactful when it is allowed to evolve in response to shifting student needs and institutional priorities.

Sustaining a Culture of Equity and Connection

The future of this work will focus on sustainability and continuous refinement. Plans are underway to formalize a framework for full-time staff development who supervise peer mentors and expand ongoing assessment of both peer mentor and mentee outcomes. The peer mentoring community is also beginning to see itself not as a set of independent programs, but as a network, one committed to reflection, growth, and shared purpose. This is not a box to check, but a culture to cultivate.

Looking ahead, two possible expansions could further strengthen the model. First, creating a divisional peer mentor summit would allow mentors from across departments to gather, share insights and deepen community. Second, embedding a mentorship innovation grant within the division could encourage departments to pilot new ideas, with funding and support provided for experimentation. These strategies would reinforce the message that mentorship is not a static service, but a dynamic tool for inclusion and transformation.

As the peer mentoring framework continues to evolve, it serves as a model for how institutions can unify fragmented efforts, center equity, and empower both full-time staff and peer mentors to thrive. The lessons from this work are clear: shared vision, flexible implementation, and authentic collaboration build not just better programs, but better outcomes for everyone involved.

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