

# Empowering Faculty and Students Through Student Success Training: A FLIGHT Training Module

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This case study is based on one of four training modules of an existing mentoring program, Financial Literacy, Integrated Guidance, and Health-care Tracts (FLIGHT), established from a Title V grant at the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW), a Hispanic-serving institution. This module offers training for faculty, administrators, and student peers on students' understanding of college culture and the mental health and wellness concerns for today's students. It also incorporates awareness and understanding of existing university resources available to students. Much has been written regarding the integration of mentorship and student success, especially for first-generation and Hispanic college students. Research reveals that students' awareness of resources and connections to other students and the university has a positive impact on retention and persistence to graduation. Integrating strategies into everyday encounters with students, providing knowledge of support systems, and creating circumstances for students across campus to connect with each other are shown to improve student success. This training is one of four required modules to become a FLIGHT-certified mentor. Its purpose is to ensure training includes information regarding positive and negative impacts on student success and wellness and provides a toolbox of strategies for mentors. Understanding what first-time college students do not know about college expectations and culture provides a different lens to address student issues. Participants are made aware of these areas and engage in discussions to explore the subject. In the Student Success and Wellness FLIGHT module, mentors (both professional and student) have demonstrated an increased awareness of student resources, programs offered by the university, and individuals within those areas to specifically help students. Subsequently, students are surrounded by people who are supportive and educated on how to bring resources to the student and encourage them to utilize services.

*Keywords:* Student success, student wellness, mentoring culture, hidden curriculum, student mentoring

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## Introduction

This paper is a case study of one of the four training modules of an existing mentoring program, Financial Literacy, Integrated Guidance, and Health-care Tracts (FLIGHT), established from a Title V grant at the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW), a Hispanic-serving institution. The Student Success and Wellness module offers training for faculty, administrators, and student peers regarding students' understanding of

college culture, as well as the mental health and wellness concerns for today's students. It also incorporates awareness and understanding of existing university resources available to students.

## Literature Review

FLIGHT mentor training is an informal and inclusive learning community model designed to create a network of trained mentors across campus in key academic and support departments.

The network “allows the mentee to benefit from multiple mentors as well as various mentorship strategies based on their individualized needs, at a given time in their journey” (Khatchikian et al., 2021, p. 548). The training provided by the Student Success and Wellness module is designed to allow FLIGHT certified mentors to better understand the current student cohort and the issues they are experiencing, how to actively listen to understand, and how to help students learn about college culture. Additionally, they learn which departments and specific people can address whatever issue a student is experiencing to serve the student best. Harrell and Forney (2011) stress the need for mentorship in Hispanic and first-generation college students to aid retention and student success. With 67% Hispanic and 32% first-generation students, UIW’s traditional undergraduates have a great need for effective mentors. In 2019, a focus group discussion with students and faculty revealed that students desired deeper interaction with a faculty member; however, 46% had not interacted with a faculty member outside the classroom. Schmidt and Akande (2011) recommended that institutions that serve a high percentage of minority students develop a culture of mentorship with the students; “These mentors must be culturally sensitive and be able to communicate what to expect in college and how college work should be done” (2011, p. 51). These are essential aspects of student success.

The FLIGHT program adopted a mentoring definition based upon informal approaches (Packard, 2016) and incorporating aspects of cascading and mosaic models (Jackson & Arnold, 2010) where multiple mentors can interact with students’ individual needs as the occasion demands. This definition states:

Mentoring consists of formal and informal practices that aim to see the whole person, understanding mentees as intersectional individuals, listen for and respond to underlying needs and questions, help mentees find their voice and place at the university, and are based on authentic and constructive dialogue between mentees and mentors (Stampfl & Allison, 2024).

This approach recognizes that different mentors can fill different needs and roles in a student’s life. Mentors can play a critical role in the success of a student by introducing them to available resources. In a meta-analysis, Nuis et al. (2023) found that 40 papers have been written regarding student success as the purpose for mentoring programs. Included in these findings are social integration and self-confidence, factors in the success of a student in higher education and elements of overall wellness (Law et al., 2020). Two of the six categories of capital described by Yosso (2005) highlight social capital, having “networks of people and community resources” (p.79), and navigational capital, having “skills to maneuver through institutions” (p. 80). Specific behaviors of mentors that make students more successful (Nuis et al., 2023) include providing information and/or resources and introducing the mentee to student life. In a study done by Phinney et al. (2011), Latino

students were found to have less depression, lower stress, and better self-efficacy when exposed to a mentor, especially when the mentor directs them to other resources for financial, mental, and physical wellness to assist the student’s success.

Another key component in student success is understanding the college culture, which can also be referred to as the hidden curriculum (Alvarez, 2021). The hidden curriculum reflects the expectations, system, standards, and college culture of which students, especially first-generation students, are unaware. Understanding these cultural gaps provides a different lens for mentors to form strategies to help students become successful.

### **FLIGHT Program**

The FLIGHT Advisory Board (FAB), in coordination with the FLIGHT Project Director, reviewed existing literature as well as current practices and resources at our institution and determined that training should include individuals in various roles across campus including faculty, administrators, and student peers. This allows a wide network of trained individuals to increase the likelihood of student interaction with mentors. Next, it was determined that training needed to integrate the university’s mission, information regarding positive and negative impacts on student success and wellness, and information on financial literacy. The final component required participants to integrate these aspects into individual FLIGHT plans of action. These components have become the four modules in FLIGHT certification training: 1) university mission, 2) student success and wellness, 3) financial literacy, and 4) FLIGHT mentor plan showcase. Training was designed for each module to occur over a 10-to-14-day period. The modality could be in person, hybrid, or fully online, depending on the semester and the cohort, and has since been offered in a rotation of each of these modalities. The purpose of the Student Success and Wellness module is to ensure training includes understanding of the university’s students, their lives and challenges, and provides a toolbox of strategies for mentors. Through resources placed into an online learning management system (LMS) and through face-to-face interactions, this module intentionally addresses two areas: student success and student wellness. Ongoing training opportunities are provided each semester with focused discussions on current mentoring experiences and mentoring experts sharing their information and knowledge.

### **Student Success and Wellness Module**

The Student Success and Wellness module includes important aspects of available student resources for academic success and mental wellness, awareness of external issues facing today’s students, and the learning culture. Relying heavily on these concepts, FLIGHT participants were asked to consider integrating strategies into

their work to improve student success. To make efficient use of time in the module, a flipped learning strategy was incorporated (Talbert, 2017). This allows the participants to watch selected videos and curated readings in their own time to formulate their thoughts and be able to apply them to guided questions and scenarios within the group time. Combining the content of this student success module with the format of flipped learning has proven to be very successful.

This module begins with the Associate Provost of Student Success introducing current, relevant undergraduate demographic information for this university's main campus. As of Fall 2024, 67% of the student population are Hispanic, 32% are first-generation college students, 48% are Pell Grant eligible, 74% live off campus, 5% consider themselves to be workers attending school instead of students who work, 36% reported being housing insecure, and 42% reported they were food insecure (Trellis Strategies, 2024). This section concludes with a discussion regarding who "our" students are. Understanding the cultural demographics, life responsibilities, and external stresses on these students is essential for mentors to know how to help them succeed.

For student success, understanding what first-time college students do not know about college expectations and culture provides a different lens to address student issues. There is a required video created by Rafael Alvarez (2021), *Having a mindset for learning and information about the "hidden curriculum"*. Many students are unaware of how different the college culture is from high school. Some students feel left behind in their first semester without understanding this idea of a learning culture or how to approach learning (Alvarez 2021). After receiving this information, participants reflect on what specific ideas resonated with them and why, offering rich discussion between mentors.

Because of the Covid 19 pandemic, most of the students coming to college have spent one to two years of K-12 learning online. There are additional issues that students are coping with today resulting in increased utilization of mental health services, even resulting in additional staff being hired in Behavioral Health Services during this time frame. Under the topic of student wellness, student mental health is addressed. According to the Trellis Strategies report (2024) for UIW, 49% of students reported experiencing generalized anxiety disorder and 59% reported sometimes or always feeling lonely. The Director of Behavioral Health, a licensed professional counselor, created a presentation addressing the common issues their office encounters with students such as, stress management/anxiety, depression, feeling underwhelmed or overwhelmed, relationship issues, learning issues, substance abuse, sleep issues, career concerns, etc. This presentation also includes mindfulness techniques mentors can use as a tool in student discussions. Participants learn more about this office and how to help students make appointments. This portion contains four

videos from the offices of student advocacy, mission and ministry, the wellness center and the health services clinic. At the end of this unit are several additional papers describing the college student mental health crisis. A case study is incorporated about a student who is attending her first year of college away from home. Participants discuss what they have learned, applying it to this scenario and the discussion.

### **Resource Awareness and Connections**

Another key component is resource awareness and the connection of students to student support offices, as these have been shown to play a positive role in student retention (Hoyt, 2023). Bordes and Arredondo (2005) also support Alvarez's (2021) approach of encouraging and changing the college culture, particularly for minority students. While many faculty are aware of some of the student services available on campus, most do not know the full depth of these services. Eight different student service departments, representing multiple support services, recorded videos explaining their services. These videos were put on the LMS to be reviewed before group gatherings or discussions. There is also required reading about active listening. After this, participants are asked to consolidate the information by considering guided discussion questions about the university's students, what their greatest needs may be, and the various student success services. This tactic of participants reading, watching videos, and organizing their thoughts through discussion questions in advance has led to engaged and meaningful discussions centered around the student.

### **Results**

At the end of the training/ certification process, participants must complete a reflection of the entire process. Specifically considering the Student Success and Wellness portion of training, multiple participants commented that this training has helped them feel more confident to be able to mentor students in the moment and to not feel constrained to mentoring in only formal mentoring settings. To the question of "How do you plan to create mentor moments with your students in or outside of the classroom", one participant stated, "By being mindful that any student encounter can be a mentoring moment. Make every encounter count to learn about the student, their life, their experiences, to share about available resources, lived experiences, to connect." Another participant added, "Be available. I think mentoring moments can happen and do happen anywhere. I want to make sure that I am open to those opportunities and never be too busy to be there for a student." An administrator said: I mostly see students outside of the classroom. My mentoring moment is actually helping them get what they need or where they need to go. I [rode] the shuttle around campus because a student was scared as

she wasn't sure about the stops. I wasn't either, so this helped me to learn as well. This student is now comfortable with the shuttle, and she has already helped somebody else by doing the same thing I did. Other participants have implemented mindfulness meditation at the start of class to help reduce student stress. Another recurring theme was to be an active listener, to focus attention on the student, hearing and responding to what they say and need. This also lends itself to the intentionality of applying what they learned in the Student Success and Wellness module.

The fourth module of their certification is creating a FLIGHT implementation plan. Many of the plans focused on student success and wellness. One faculty member designed a FLIGHT plan to implement "Mentor Monday", using the first 5-10 minutes of every Monday with their junior- and senior-level classes to discuss topics on students' minds. Mentor Monday created a "norm and a community of openness to discuss topics". This faculty followed up with FAB members:

The student success module helped inform my FLIGHT plan by explaining the importance of the learning culture, commitment, and mentorship:

I have high expectations for my students, and I apply rules consistently regarding their performance in class and create a learning culture. For example, I have an applied service-learning project in my class or experiential exercises as part of learning culture. Additionally, they are not allowed to have devices open/on-student engagement has increased, and I've had students tell me that they appreciate not being distracted by other students' devices. I also take attendance. This is part of the commitment. They [also] know that my office/email/phone is available for them to meet/talk to me and to ask for help, which is part of the mentorship along with Mentor Mondays.

## Discussion

The FLIGHT program has had an overwhelmingly positive response from the university community. In only four years, Spring 2022 to Spring 2025, there are a total of 195 Certified FLIGHT Professional Mentors (faculty and administrators), including the interim provost of the institution, and 140 Certified FLIGHT Peer Mentors (students). The Summer 2025 cohort for professional members has added another 15 professional mentors. FLIGHT training has other benefits, that of creating a community within the FLIGHT Certified Professional Mentors and the Flight Certified Peer Mentors cohorts (Smith & McCarty, 2024). Twice a year, the Flight Certified Mentor Workshops provide additional times for participants to come together with students as their focus. This process allows faculty and administrators from every school on campus to interact and share success strategies and stories of implementing their FLIGHT plans. The FLIGHT mentor motto has become "Every student is our student."

Many of the strategies taught in the Student Success and Wellness module are about creating mindful mentoring moments, often when students are in distress. Mentors help students understand that they will have many different types of mentors at various moments in their lives, often simultaneously. Making sure faculty and administrators are aware of the depth of academic services available to students allows them to be more confident when referring a student to one of these services, including knowing a specific person at that office to direct them to. In several cases, they provide support and walk the student to the service, creating further opportunities for a mentor moment with the student. One of the issues mentors often mention is the difficulty of being fully present for students due to conflicting responsibilities. A focus on active listening has become part of the training. This impacted several participants greatly, reminding them of its importance, and this term "active listening" was frequently used in their FLIGHT implementation plans.

There is a disconnect between what faculty expect students to know and understand about college culture and what students know and understand (Alvarez, 2001). First year in college, especially first-generation college students may not understand what is expected and where to turn for help, or even that they have people to turn to for help. The additional pressures of social media lead to anxiety and loneliness (Vannucci et al., 2017). Students tend to communicate over their devices rather than face-to-face, which adds to a lack of a sense of belonging. In some Hispanic families, students are expected to maintain family responsibilities such as dropping off or picking up a sibling from school or even taking a grandparent to doctor's visits so that they can translate to English. These responsibilities often interfere with school responsibilities and add to their stress (Sy & Romero, 2008). Becoming more aware of the students' culture and responsibilities outside of college parameters allows those interacting with them throughout campus to be more empathetic to their issues. This creation of a mentor "net" is intended to support students and help keep them engaged and progressing to graduation.

The First Year Engagement Seminar (FYES), a required freshman course, was also created as part of the Title V grant, which funds the FLIGHT program. FLIGHT Certified Professional Mentors are the only ones who can teach the FYES course. They and a Certified Peer Mentor interact with freshmen for their first semester at the university, which allows those teaching this class to implement what they learned through FLIGHT Certification. This course has been a university requirement for all freshmen since Fall 2023. This course aims to increase student retention by informing freshmen of the college culture, academic and wellness support, study, and financial strategies. Students are introduced to all the different academic and wellness student support services.

## Conclusion

The importance of mentor programs, especially for Hispanic and first-generation students, is to increase retention and persistence to graduation (Harrell & Forney, 2011; Schmidt & Akande, 2011). The FLIGHT Mentor Certification program sets out to educate faculty and administration regarding best practices for mentoring and student success. The Student Success and Wellness module of FLIGHT training utilizes demographic data and discussion to clarify student needs. Sections addressing the many academic and wellness student services that are available to students give the mentors tools to use as needed to connect students to these offices. When students engage more with support services, it has been shown to have a positive effect on persistence to graduation (Hoyt, 2023). Understanding the learning culture of the university (Alvarez, 2021) and techniques to show students how to learn provides mentors with what Yasso (2005) describes as social and navigational capital. These certified mentors, spread throughout campus, create informal, in the moment mentoring that occurs spontaneously to meet the student's needs (Jackson & Arnold, 2010; Khatchikian et al., 2021; Packard, 2016). Faculty and administration have different implementation strategies and techniques based upon their role and interactions with students. Those teaching the FYES class strategically educate the students about the college culture, learning culture, support services, financial literacy, and study strategies. This FLIGHT Certified Mentor training creates an educated body of mentors to understand how best to support students on their path toward graduation.

## Limitations

Some limitations exist within the scope of this project. One of the most challenging aspects is collecting outcome data, which is quantitative. Much of the work is subjective; therefore, qualitative measures are often the only way to understand whether or not this module impacts the FLIGHT mentor's work. This program is only implemented with faculty and administrators who work primarily with undergraduate students. It is unknown whether or not the same impact could be replicated at the graduate level, as graduate students' needs and resources can differ. Lastly, it is not yet known whether graduation rates will be affected as the timeframe of this implementation does not have a full cohort of graduates. Our recommendations for future research include investigating the impact of mentorship on students who graduate after the implementation of the FLIGHT program. As mentioned, specific training for mentors who work with adult populations may need to be adjusted to address their particular needs. A deeper investigation into how training should be modified based on future research should also be performed to ensure training addresses pertinent needs and utilizes the newest methods.

## Recommendations

As a result of this work, we encourage institutions that perform formalized mentor training to include a focus on the learning culture and hidden curriculum. This will help students, particularly first-generation students, navigate a system in which they possess very little knowledge. Mentor training should also focus on student success strategies to improve mental health and wellbeing for students. This can help students perceive that the mentor is vested in their overall wellbeing. Lastly, mentor training should expand their network to empower members of the university community who may be overlooked as informal mentors due to their role in student success.

Through the Student Success and Wellness training module, FLIGHT-trained mentors (both professional and student) have demonstrated an increased awareness of the issues facing today's undergraduate students. They have gained techniques to help students become more engaged as well as learned about undergraduate student resources and programs offered by the university. Students are supported by people across campus in various roles who are educated on how to bring resources to a student and encourage them to utilize these services. Stronger connections between faculty and administrators in different disciplines and departments have created a super support network for students to help them succeed at the university. As one freshman student stated, "One thing that surprised me about college life is that you are never alone; you may have more independence, but you have so much support from campus." This is what we want for every student.

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