

SHIFT Happens: Reimagining Mentoring Through a Wellbeing Lens

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Student wellbeing plays an increasingly important role in academic persistence, as well as social and personal development throughout college. However, current trends indicate that student wellness is in decline. The SHIFT initiative at The University of Texas at Austin seeks to challenge cultural norms and engage the broader campus community in substance misuse prevention. This goal is reflected in the collaborative First-Year Interest Group (FIG) and Transfer-Year Interest Group (TrIG) mentor development curriculum. This case study examines the impact of this collaboration on the wellbeing of new students. Our findings suggest that peer mentors positively influence incoming students by helping them build protective assets—such as constructive use of time—which promotes overall wellness and reduces the likelihood of substance misuse. The UGS104/UGS104T Mentor Development course equips peer mentors with insight into the 40 Assets for the 40 Acres framework, skills in Motivational Interviewing, and knowledge of national and university-specific data on substance misuse. Originally developed for K-12 settings, this strengths-based framework has been adapted for the college context in this case study and found to be effective in supporting student wellbeing and success. This training enables mentors to more effectively support their mentees' mental health, academic persistence, and overall wellbeing, ultimately empowering new students to make informed decisions and prioritize their wellness. Practitioners working with peer mentors should consider incorporating wellbeing and protective factors into their mentoring models as a strategy to enhance student success and reduce substance misuse. Institutions may also benefit from embedding such wellbeing education into peer mentor training programs.

Keywords: Wellbeing, peer mentorship, substance misuse

Introduction

Holistic student wellbeing is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone for fostering academic achievement, positive social integration, and comprehensive personal development (Arria et al., 2013; Chu et al., 2023; Song & Hu, 2024). Yet, contemporary university students navigate a complex landscape of challenges (Abdulahi, 2023; D'Agostino, 2024). Substance misuse remains a persistent and pressing concern on college campuses, particularly during the first six weeks of the academic year—a period often referred to as the 'Red Zone' due to heightened vulnerability to risky behaviors, including alcohol and drug use (Rochman, 2013). The critical first six weeks of college, in particular, represent a heightened risk period for mental health deterioration, substance misuse, and interpersonal violence, often impacting student success (Rochman, 2013; Buelow, 2017).

Recognizing that the first-year experience profoundly influences a student's entire collegiate trajectory, robust support systems are essential. Peer mentorship, especially when integrated into High-Impact Practices (HIPs), provides crucial guidance. In this case study we explore the efficacy of a strengths-based factor model to

enhance student wellbeing with the ultimate goal being improving the experiences of new students along with their overall wellbeing.

Literature Review

To foster holistic student wellbeing with a particular focus on substance misuse prevention, The University of Texas at Austin developed a strengths-based frameworks that emphasizes developmental supports and internal competencies rather than solely focusing on deficits. This 40 Assets for the 40 Acres framework is an adaptation of the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets, a well-established and empirically-supported model that identifies key internal and external factors associated with positive youth development and reduced engagement in risky behaviors across diverse populations (Leffert et al., 1998; Benson et al., 2007; Sesma et al., 2005).

Research consistently demonstrates that a greater accumulation of these assets correlates with improved academic achievement, enhanced social-emotional health, and increased resilience (Scales et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2011). Building upon this solid foundation, the 40 Assets provides

a helpful framework for UT Austin faculty and peer educators to view their teaching and mentorship as impactful on student wellbeing.

40 Assets for the 40 Acres Framework

The framework categorizes assets into external supports and internal competencies critical for the development of wellbeing in higher education. For instance, one category of external assets is Constructive Use of Time. Researchers have found that the students who build the assets under this category – Constructive Use of Time and Campus Engagement – are less likely to abuse alcohol and promote greater overall wellness (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008; Perron et al., 2011). Internal assets can also play an important role in student wellbeing. Research indicates that higher levels of creative thinking and problem-solving are associated with enhanced academic achievement (Anwar, Aness, & Khizar, 2012) and lower rates of substance misuse (D'Silva & Aminabhavi, 2013). Another crucial internal asset, Sense of Purpose, along with related characteristics such as general enthusiasm and a higher internal locus of control, correlates with improved academic success (DeWitz et al., 2009) and is associated with the ability to cope with stress and positive health (Kim et al., 2022). By holistically integrating these protective factors, the 40 Assets model provides a strengths-based approach to supporting student wellbeing that extends beyond the deficit mentality.

High Impact Practices (HIPs)

Research has identified eleven high impact educational practices found to significantly benefit students' academic and social success in college (Kuh et al., 2017; Brownell, & Swaner, 2009; Benjamin, 2015). Among first-year students, substantial gains have been linked to participation in first-year seminars and experiences, as well as learning communities (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). These practices are designed to ease the transition to college, foster engagement, and promote both social and academic connection (Kuh et al., 2017). These factors are crucial to the success and retention of first-year students (Tinto, 1995). While other high impact practices such as service learning, study abroad, and student-faculty research also contribute to student achievement, it is notable that the positive effects of high impact practices have been observed notably among first-year students. Students who participate in these practices consistently persist at a greater rate and earn higher GPAs than those who do not (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Notably, peer mentorship also often plays an important role in the success of many of these first-year focused practices.

First-Year Seminars and Learning Communities

High quality first-year experiences, including

first-year seminars, support students' retention, intellectual and practical development, and foster community through enrichment events with faculty and peers (Kuh et al., 2017; Tinto, 1995). Learning communities typically involve a group of students taking one or more course together, often paired with co-curricular experiences focused on community building and support services like mentoring, tutoring, or advising (Jessup-Anger, 2015). Similar to first-year seminars, learning communities often allow students to form community both inside and outside of the classroom, contributing to their academic persistence and sense of belonging on campus (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). While their structure can vary, students in these communities report richer academic experiences, greater personal development, and stronger social connections, often spending more time together outside the classroom and forming friendships in the process (Jessup-Anger, 2015; Tinto, 1995).

Efficacy of Mentoring Within HIPs

Both learning communities and first-year seminars are two of several high impact educational practices where incoming students often benefit from peer mentorship, positively supporting their transition to college (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). Effective peer mentorship for undergraduate students has been linked to several benefits for mentees including enhanced goal attainment, retention, confidence, academic performance, sense of belonging, career preparation, and wellbeing (Glaser et al., 2006; Orsini, 2023). Peer mentoring has also been found to be especially valuable during students' transition period into college as well as in their first year of studies, often allowing students to make the most of academic and social supports available at their university. Participants of first year peer mentorship programs report feelings of acceptance and security as a result of their mentoring experiences and feel more connected to their university than non-mentored students, increasing students' likelihood of graduating (Andrews & Clark, 2011; Collings, et al., 2014; Sharp, 2021; Yomtov et al., 2017). Within UT Austin's First-Year Interest Group (FIG) and Transfer Year Interest Group (TrIG) program, first-year seminars, learning communities, and peer mentorship all operate in tandem, providing the necessary transitional supports incoming students require to be successful and persist throughout their time in college. Program

FIG/TrIG Program at UT Austin

First-Year Interest Groups (FIGs) and Transfer-Year Interest Groups (TrIGs) at The University of Texas at Austin are small learning communities designed to help new and transfer students transition into university life. Each group includes 18-25 students who take 2-4 classes

together in their first fall semester and meet weekly for a seminar led by a peer mentor and staff facilitator. Within their weekly seminars, peer mentors prepare lessons and activities that cover foundational concepts essential during a transition to college such as study and time management strategies, campus life and involvement opportunities, as well as social opportunities. FIGs support students new to college, while TrIGs are for those transferring from other institutions. These communities foster connection and provide guidance on academics, campus involvement, and student life. Since the program's creation in 1998, approximately 4,560 peer mentors have been trained, and over 88,484 students have been served as of 2023.

FIG and TrIG mentors are paid student leaders who lead a weekly one-hour seminar during the fall semester and organize educational and social activities to help students become better acquainted with each other, faculty members, and the UT community. New mentors enroll in the First-Year Experience Office's UGS 104/104T Mentor Development course for the spring semester. This is a for-credit course that runs for about fourteen weeks and meets for two hours, one day a week. Within this course, mentors cover a variety of topics to prepare them to lead their FIGs and TrIGs in the fall. Some of these topics include student development theory, group dynamics, navigating difficult conversations, practicing empathy, and Motivational Interviewing (MI). The FIG and TrIG program at UT Austin currently offer learning communities in the College of Education, Cockrell School of Engineering, College of Fine Arts, School of Information, Jackson School of Geosciences, College of Liberal Arts, School of Nursing, and the LBJ School of Public Affairs.

SHIFT Initiative

The SHIFT initiative at The University of Texas at Austin operates on the premise that campus culture is capable of and amenable to change through interdisciplinary, strengths-based strategies that enhance overall student wellbeing and reduce substance misuse. Recognizing the influence of the broader campus community - including faculty, staff, alumni, and parents - SHIFT actively engages these stakeholders to reinforce positive norms and cultivate environments that mitigate risks. This approach emphasizes leveraging existing university structures and strategic partnerships for sustainable environmental change rather than focusing solely on programmatic outputs. To translate these principles into practical support, SHIFT has developed a unique collaborative training program for peer mentors within First-year Interest Groups (FIGs) and Transfer-year Interest Groups (TrIGs). Through this partnership, first-year and transfer student mentors receive

comprehensive training designed to empower them in supporting first-year students' wellbeing as necessary condition for academic success.

The curriculum integrates three core components: an in-depth understanding of the 40 Assets; foundational skills in Motivational Interviewing (MI); and an understanding of national and university-specific data on substance misuse. Embedded in a 14-week development course, the SHIFT training empowers mentors to proactively build protective factors, fostering a supportive campus environment and guiding mentees toward safe and mindful decisions regarding their substance use and overall wellbeing.

Results: Program Impact

Cultivating Student Wellbeing and Academic Integration

To assess the impact of focused wellbeing training, an end-of-semester survey is administered to FIG and TrIG participants each fall semester. A combination of multiple choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions is a strength of the survey instrument, allowing for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data on a broad scale that would be more challenging to achieve through interviews or focus groups. In Fall 2024, the survey garnered 1,929 completed responses from a total of 5,064 students participating in FIG/TrIGs, yielding a 38% response rate, indicative of meaningful engagement with the instrument. To analyze these data, we used a hybrid coding method, first creating a deductive scheme based on the 40 Assets framework and then developing inductive subcodes (primarily using in vivo codes) within a data matrix to generate themes. The findings from this survey describe mentees' perspectives of their wellbeing, academic confidence, and social integration - outcomes that sit squarely within the 40 Assets framework.

Wellbeing as Pre-requisite for Learning

The survey highlights students' clear understanding of the interconnectedness of wellbeing and academic success, a key long-term goal outlined in SHIFT's strategic plan. Nearly all respondents affirmed (56% strongly agreeing and 43% agreeing) that personal health and wellbeing are necessary for academic success. This widespread recognition underscores the relevance and importance of holistic wellbeing initiatives within a university setting, validating the program's foundational premise that addressing student wellbeing is integral to their academic journey.

Qualitative responses provide insight into this awareness. As one student noted, "[My mentor] has taught me not only different ways that I can focus on my wellbeing but also the resources on campus that are here to help, such as campus mental health resources." This student credits

her mentor with educating her and her peers on actionable strategies and available resources, reinforcing the belief that wellbeing is achievable and supported.

Another participant shared, “My FIG mentor has been very open with expressing how crucial wellbeing is while at college. I now try to prioritize my mental health so I do not hate my college experience and get depressed.” For this first-year student, the mentor’s direct and honest communication about the importance of wellbeing led to a shift in their prioritization and a proactive approach to mental health, linking wellbeing directly to a positive college experience.

Wellbeing and Academic Self-Efficacy

Furthermore, the program’s influence on academic self-efficacy is evident. The survey revealed that 91% of students (30% strongly agreeing and 61% agreeing) reported that their FIG or TrIG experience significantly helped them feel confident in their ability to learn the content in their classes. This finding speaks directly to the cultivation of internal assets such as achievement motivation and self-efficacy, demonstrating how the peer mentor support structure empowers students with the academic confidence essential for navigating the rigor of university coursework. In an open-ended question on their experience with their mentor, one student stated, “[My mentor] has provided me with all the resources I need to succeed, she put the ball in my court to utilize what she’s taught us or not.” This particular student illustrates how her mentor directly empowered students by providing essential resources and knowledge, fostering Assets including Personal Power, Caring University Community, and Planning and Decision Making. Such references to mentors’ Motivational Interviewing technique – playing the “guide on the side” and not the “sage on the stage” – show their capacity to build confidence and self-efficacy.

Another student reported that “learning about the resources and tricks from a more experienced [Statistics] major has allowed me to better develop study skills.” This mentor offered practical knowledge and skills needed to feel more prepared to tackle the academic demands within their Statistics curriculum. Beyond academic confidence, the mentee suggested a substantial progress in fostering a sense of academic belonging through the Positive View of Personal Future and Positive Peer Influence Assets.

Wellbeing and Sense of Belonging

FIG and TrIG students also reported feeling valued by and bonded to campus, with 95% of survey participants (33% strongly agreeing and 62% agreeing) reported establishing a sense of belonging to the broader Longhorn community.

This outcome is critical for student retention and overall wellbeing, reflecting the successful development of external assets like Caring University Community and internal assets like University Engagement, which mentors actively promote through the structured interactions within FIGs and TrIGs.

Qualitative feedback underscores the impact a mentor can have in establishing a sense of belonging. A TrIG mentee shared, “[My mentor] has created a family for us. I have met some of my best friends in TrIG because they created such a great environment.” This student found their mentor to establish a warm and inclusive environment, facilitating deep social connections that formed a tight-knit “family.” A FIG mentee emphasized the importance of having a mentor from their college who was just a year or two ahead of them in their program. This student shared that their mentor had “been extremely easy to talk to and get real advice from [as] someone who just went through our experience.” This experience embodies the important role of mentors in developing Older Peer Relationships, a powerful Asset to bolster wellbeing and protect against substance misuse.

Mentor Influence on Healthful Decision-Making

The program also appears to empower students in making proactive health decisions. When queried about their choices since matriculating at UT Austin, 68% of students (22% selecting “Always” and 46% selecting “Very often”) indicated that they make positive choices to increase their health and wellbeing. This highlights the development of internal assets related to health and wellness and responsibility.

In their open-ended responses, FIG and TrIG students often credited their mentor with improving their wellbeing mindset. As one participant shared:

My mentor in the FIG program has had a significant impact on my wellbeing and academic journey. They provided personalized guidance and offered practical strategies for managing stress, like effective time management techniques and wellness tips tailored to the demands of college life. Specifically, my mentor organized check-ins to discuss not only academics but also personal challenges, which created a safe space to share experiences. Their support helped me feel more connected to the campus community and empowered me to prioritize my mental and physical health while navigating my coursework.

This mentee’s experience directly highlights the mentor’s influence on student wellbeing, encompassing personalized guidance, stress management strategies, creation of safe spaces, and empowerment to prioritize mental and physical health.

Another student noted, “My FIG has really reduced my stress, especially around the concept of failing.” This mentor was able to alleviate

the student's academic anxieties, thereby contributing significantly to students' overall mental wellbeing and growth mindset.

Collectively, these descriptive data points, amplified by student voices, demonstrate that the SHIFT-FIG/TrIG collaboration, through its comprehensive training on the 40 Assets model and related strategies, significantly contributes to enhancing student wellbeing, fostering academic confidence, and facilitating crucial social connections during the formative first year of university. The data suggests the program effectively equips peer mentors to support the development of essential protective factors, leading to a more positive and successful college experience for participating students.

Discussion

Implications for Practice

The success of the SHIFT-FIG/TrIG collaboration demonstrates that training peer mentors in wellbeing frameworks like the 40 Assets and Motivational Interviewing equips them to better support mentees' mental health, academic persistence, and overall wellbeing. Institutions should consider embedding this type of wellbeing education into peer mentor training programs. These findings reinforce existing research suggesting that integrating peer mentorship into high-impact practices, such as learning communities and first-year seminars, can enhance student success.

This case study adds to the existing body of research by showing how framing the mentor's role through a wellbeing lens can positively impact mentee's adoption of knowledge, skills, and mindsets that improve not only their wellness but their overall student experience.

Programs like UT Austin's FIGs and TrIGs led by trained peer mentors, help new students build a sense of belonging and navigate academic challenges more effectively. Additionally, peer mentors can help normalize conversations around substance misuse and wellbeing, as students often feel more comfortable opening up to peers than to faculty or staff. By adopting practices such as Motivational Interviewing, peer mentors are equipped to engage in empathetic, student-centered conversations that help empower mentees to make their own informed, health-promoting decisions. Practitioners and campus leaders should prioritize the integration of wellbeing frameworks

into peer mentor training and intentionally create spaces for these conversations to occur. Doing so not only supports individual student outcomes but also contributes to a broader culture of care and prevention across campus.

Implications for Research

Future studies could explore whether students involved in the SHIFT-FIG/TrIG collaboration or similar initiatives experience long-term benefits in areas such as retention, graduation, substance use, and overall wellbeing compared to their non-mentored peers. Further research might also examine the broader impact of peer mentorship, identifying which mentor traits, training components, or relational dynamics most strongly contribute to positive outcomes.

Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate how peer mentorship interacts with other high-impact practices such as student-faculty research and service learning, and whether its effectiveness varies across different student populations or institutional contexts. Researchers should also consider longitudinal designs to assess the sustained impact of wellbeing focused mentorship on both mentors and mentees.

Conclusion

The collaborative effort between The University of Texas at Austin's SHIFT initiative and FIG/TrIG program demonstrates a powerful model for supporting student wellbeing through strengths-based, mentor-led learning communities. The integration of the 40 Assets and education surrounding Motivational Interviewing equips peer mentors to positively influence first-year and transfer students' academic and social success during their transition to college.

The collaboration's results highlight that students benefit from having peer mentors who foster belonging, promote positive decision-making, and normalize conversations regarding wellbeing and substance use. As higher education institutions increasingly recognize the connection between student wellbeing and academic achievement, the SHIFT-FIG/TrIG model offers a scalable and evidence-informed approach to supporting students. To meet the evolving needs of today's students, institutions must move beyond academic support alone and invest in holistic, peer-driven models that center wellbeing as a foundation for success.

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