

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Mentorship Their Way: How an Adaptable Mentorship Program Enhances Transfer Students' Sense of Belonging

By Tessa Benedict-Philipp and Jaclyn Leigh Thalassa Duerr

What would it look like to create a mentoring program specifically designed for transfer students, supporting them from pre-arrival to their graduation day? Whereas transfer student transition programs are often created with a deficit mindset or modeled after first-time, first-year research, these higher education professionals sought to create a program that focused on engagement in a way that met transfer students' individualized needs and built their sense of belonging.

How do you support a student population that is both nuanced in need, while also disproportionately lonely? (Hansen-Brown, *et al.* 2022). This was the question UC San Diego's Triton Transfer Hub (TTH) attempted to solve by creating an adaptable mentoring program. UC San Diego enrolls more than 7,500 transfer students, making up one-third of the admitted students each year. Opening in 2019, the TTH was tasked with providing resources, services, and programs to empower Triton Transfers to achieve their goals as they navigate UC San Diego's academic and cultural landscape. As the first centralized support for all transfer students, the TTH began to build programs and services with one full-time staff member on a limited budget. The solution: A scalable mentoring program that connects all enrolled transfer students with a peer coach throughout their time at UCSD with a peer mentor who is knowledgeable on resources and well-connected on campus. As

the program expanded through enhanced budgets and lessons learned, the focus when pairing mentors and students shifted to ensuring that the basis of connections was identity-based.

Transfer students are a diverse population and are more likely to be first-generation, low-income, and from historically underrepresented ethnic groups (McFadden 2016; Pascarella, *et al.* 2004; Terenzini, *et al.* 1996). Furthermore, transfer students are more likely to have additional life commitments, such as paid jobs and familial responsibilities (Herrera and Jain 2013). The transfer student experience is further complicated by the different academic experiences these students bring with them before entering the university setting (Hayes, *et al.* 2020).

Much research on student transition focuses on the first-time, first-year student experience (Gardner 2021). Furthermore, previous research on transfer student success has primarily focused on what transfer students

lack in preparation and experience (Duggan and Pickering 2008; Hills 1965; Roksa and Calcagno 2008). It is only recently that studies have begun to consider the assets and positive experiences of this diverse population. Universities are becoming increasingly aware that transfer students enter their university experience with unique social and cultural capital, which helps them flourish academically. For example, resilience, financial knowledge, and formal collaboration experience have been identified as indicators of retention (Abrica 2018; Moser 2013). Furthermore, the support provided by family and peers becomes critical as they navigate their transfer process (Maliszewski Lukszo and Hayes 2020). Finally, building relationships and mentoring experiences have also been predictors of transfer students' ability to cope with problems and transition (Moser 2013).

It is with this asset-based approach that the TTH curated its support services, with the flagship program being peer mentoring. With an original staff of one, the center took on a "for students, by students" approach to its customer service model. Peer mentors were hired as "peer coaches" and became not only one-on-one supporters for the entire transfer student population on campus but also the program planners, presenters, and event organizers of the TTH. This student-led approach enabled the TTH to pilot new activities and programs that directly addressed the needs of the population they served.

The concept of providing a mentor for more than 7,500 students seemed unsustainable and unscalable. However, the program was founded on the TTH's motto of empowering students to "build their own adventure" and offered students a participatory model, allowing them to truly create a mentoring experience that supports their unique needs. To do so, the TTH assigned a peer coach to every transfer student, opting them all into the program, which will support them from pre-arrival to graduation. To pilot this approach, coaches were assigned caseloads of students by their college. Peer coaches connected with their caseload by sending weekly emails that offered resources, one-on-one support, and some fun facts. Emails were relevant to student needs based on the time during the academic cycle, such as when they are preparing for midterms

or when research applications are open. This allowed the peer coach to show their personality through their writing. Students within each caseload had the option to "opt out" of their coaching email at any point by simply clicking a button. However, only about a dozen have made this selection.

Coaching relationships are centered around weekly emails, resource referrals, and offers for virtual or in-person meetings. Furthermore, coaches were "the face of the Triton Transfer Hub"—being a friendly face at the front desk and being available to support students who might drop in. Students could choose to actively engage with a coach through an appointment or passively by simply reading weekly emails. By providing each transfer student with a coach, many students felt the benefit of support and care, regardless of whether they reciprocated with communication to their coach. Transfer students continued to benefit from the concept of social identity theory, which involves the feeling of belonging or being part of something with a shared identity (Hogg 2016).

The benefits of the programs are seen in full throughout the hiring season, as the demand to be hired as a peer coach has grown exponentially in the six years of programming. As TTH peer coaches continue to be the face of space and services, transfer students can see themselves within the role, helping others who walk in their shoes. What was once a small pool of ten applicants for eight positions has now grown to 56 applicants for thirteen positions for the 2024–2025 academic year. Applicants who were former users of the TTH shared in their cover letters how grateful they were to receive encouragement and support from their peer coaches via email (passive engagement) and during their visits to the TTH (active engagement), and how they wished to return the favor.

In 2023, a new program coordinator with a background in facilitating programming for the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), a program designed for first-generation and low-income students, assumed the lead role in the peer coach program. Under new leadership, the peer coaching program began to weave in elements of Critical Mentorship Theory (CMT). CMT

ensures that students' identities are centered through a mentoring relationship. Peer coaches are trained to be culturally responsible, meaning they will not encourage assimilation into the university but will instead empower students through emphasizing their cultural capital. In addition, mentees may individually select peer coaches based on brief background descriptions, ensuring they feel best matched and supported in identities most salient to their success (Weiston-Serdan 2017).

The Impact of a Transfer Peer Coach

Assessing a mentoring program that allows for passive engagement presents unique complications, as it becomes difficult to quantify its impact. However, the TTH employs a mixed-methods approach to measure programmatic outcomes.

- **Post-Appointment Surveys:** Students who engage in a coaching appointment are sent a post-appointment survey about their experience. Students reflect on the impact of having peer coaches with shared identity:
 - The biggest takeaway from meeting with [name redacted] is the confidence they have given to me to advocate for myself, something that, as a first-gen, non-traditional student, has been something that I need to work on. They held space for me to ask my questions, even if some might have seemed silly. The confidence I gained from having my questions answered is invaluable.
 - [Name redacted] was very kind, and it felt nice to connect with a coach who's also queer :)
- **Quarterly Participation Data:** The TTH tracks all visits and appointments, whether virtual or in-person. During the last academic year, 543 unique students were supported by transfer peer coaches.
- **Student Exit Survey Feedback:** Each year, the TTH sends an exit survey to graduating seniors, in which they share their engagement patterns and places and spaces where they find their sense of belonging on campus. Students can indicate that they have engaged with a peer coach and also share their experience. Within 2024 survey data, 23 percent of respondents indicated participating in coaching.

Qualitatively, many expressed gratitude for having their peer coach available, and how it increased their knowledge and confidence:

My coach answered all of my questions highly effectively and provided me with website links and resources to assist in planning out my next moves. As an incoming transfer student, it was invaluable to obtain her insights about subjects ranging from research opportunities to meal plans and parking options. Thank you again!!!

- **Responses and Read Receipts for Weekly Coach Emails:** The student team uses MyEmma to send coaching emails, allowing them to customize messages to their personalities. When students respond to an email, it is sent directly to a peer coach's inbox. Although read rates vary based on the time of the quarter, peer coach inboxes flood weekly with questions or updates, like a pen pal. Occasionally, rather than ask for support or mentorship directly, a student will write a thank you note to their peer coach, informing them that their emails are read and bring joy to their busy weeks.
- **The Demand to Be Hired as a Peer Coach:** As TTH peer coaches continue to be the face of space and services, transfer students can see themselves within the role, helping others who walk in their shoes.
- **Retention Rates:** The TTH pulled retention and persistence rates for first-year and continuing students who participated in peer coaching consistently (at least 3 times) during Fall 2023 (Table 1). Results indicate that students who participated in coaching were less likely to be placed on academic probation and more likely to have higher quarterly and cumulative GPAs.

TABLE 1 ➤ Student Performance, by Usage of Peer Coaching

	Coaching	No Coaching
Academic Standing: Good (%)	95.5	88.0
GPA		
Quarterly	3.2	3.0
Cumulative	3.3	3.1

Suggestions for Practitioners

Fight the urge to “go big or go home”: Every new pilot needs a chance to breathe. Take time to try new things; learn from mistakes; assess; and pivot as needed. The TTH Peer Coach Program started with a small group of eight coaches who were connecting in a 1:1 capacity and now has evolved to a group of thirteen who meet 1:1 in groups, plan events, and do so much more.

To be student-centered, make students the creative lead: The “for students/by students” approach has made guests feel like the TTH space and services are uniquely theirs. Many of the ideas in the TTH space have been born out of inspiration from the student employees. They have felt empowered to create projects and bring new ideas to the table by having supervisors who are ready to hear, support, and try *most* suggestions once. In fact, all coaches are required to complete a legacy project—a project that will leave a lasting impact on either students or the TTH as a physical entity within the academic year. These projects range from creating curriculum for dialogue circles that focus on the exploration of intersecting identities, to building tutorials on how to use the technology needed within their respective roles. Coaches may use any media to address a lapse in support for transfers. This inspires new modalities of support while building the resumes of student employees.

Mentoring transfer students requires diverse representation for a diverse population: The TTH has shifted from matching students based on college to prioritizing self-selection, then matching on identities—from major to first-generation status to age. Coach profiles are created, and students can opt to meet with a coach who represents their unique identity. This sense of ownership over experience not only encourages students to meet with their coach more frequently due to the autonomy of choice, but also gives them a chance to feel a sense of belonging as their identity is strongly represented and

successful within the institution. When hiring or recruiting coaches and mentors, ensure to have a variety of students from different backgrounds, lifestyles, and goals.

Remember that assessment and evaluation come in many forms: Oftentimes, practitioners focus on what is quantifiable, making it difficult to assess passive engagement. Utilizing multiple data sources that give both qualitative and quantitative impact can truly provide a sense of the program’s reach. On the quantitative side, this might include reviewing website hits and email read receipts. On the qualitative side, this might include pulling anonymous feedback from email responses, exit surveys, or satisfaction surveys.

Conclusion

Transfer students are a diverse group not only navigating the sociocultural landscape of their new institution but also entering with junior-level needs, such as seeking to build research skills or internship experiences. Having a guide who is supportive and encouraging, from a similar background, and seen as a leader within the campus, makes their transition in and out of college seamless. This relationship is mutually beneficial for senior-level peer mentors, as it further connects them with the university, contributes to their professional development, and builds confidence in their leadership. As a flagship program within the start-up of the TTH, Peer Coaching was initiated due to a lack of staffing to support such a large and diverse population, and it remained relevant and salient due to student demand. Creating a way for students to both passively and actively engage with their peer coaches has increased a sense of belonging and connection among students whose needs range from quick questions and simple encouragements to full-fledged, recurring 1:1 appointments. This individualized, asset-based, identity-conscious approach to student engagement is an essential practice to transfer student success.

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About the Authors



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Tessa Benedict-Philipp is committed to reducing educational barriers and building more equitable, student-centered systems in higher education. Since beginning her higher education career in 2019, she has worked across a range of university programs focused on access, equity, and

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