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Supporting College Student Success through Connections to Mentors and Campus Champions

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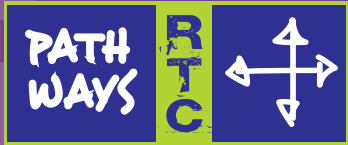
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Supporting College Student Success through Connections to Mentors and Campus Champions



A strategy brief for campus-based mentors and other student support programs

This brief shares best practices learned on the *Project Futures* research study being conducted at *Portland State University* and local community colleges in Portland, Oregon. The study is testing evidence-based mentoring strategies for underserved students, in this case college freshmen with lived experience in foster care and with mental health stressors. Campus-based mentoring is an increasingly popular strategy to better support under-represented students, who in addition to navigating the typical challenges of college life, may face additional barriers to student success, such as:

- Homelessness or housing instability and/or financial insecurity with no safety net,
- Mental health and trauma,
- Starting college academically behind their peers, or
- Lack of belonging or difficulty finding ways to engage with peers and community.

To learn more about addressing the needs of these under-represented students, Project Futures provided one-on-one near-peer mentoring. This approach is based on previous research¹ showing that such students respond well to coaching by near-peer mentors, with similar lived experience, who are trained to help them identify and work towards academic and social goals.

To better connect participants to additional campus resources, Project Futures introduced the Campus Champions model for training faculty and staff across campus to support underserved students. Students report that having access to people who understand their lived experiences helps them to be more successful in school. Findings so far suggest that combining these two strategies – near-peer mentoring plus access to trained faculty and staff – provides a uniquely accessible network of support to underserved students, such as those with foster care experience and mental health stressors.

Findings so far suggest that combining near-peer mentoring with access to trained faculty and staff provides a uniquely accessible network of support to underserved students, such as those with foster care experience and mental health stressors.

1. Phillips, L.A., Powers, L.E., Geenen, S., et al. (2015). Better Futures: A validated model for increasing postsecondary preparation and participation of youth in foster care with mental health challenges. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 57(7), 50-59; Geenen, S., Powers, L.E., Phillips, L.A., et al. (2015). Better Futures: A randomized field test of a model for supporting young people in foster care with mental health challenges to participate in higher education. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 42(2), 150-171.

What are Campus Champions?

Campus Champions are motivated faculty and staff members from across campus who have volunteered to serve as identified point people to provide additional support to under-represented students. Recruited from across campus to become a network of allies, these Champions can be instructors, registration and advising officers, financial aid administrators, student support program managers, and others. Champions participate in an initial half-day training focused on

servicing students from vulnerable populations, and they receive ongoing check-ins and refresher trainings to develop their skills. The Campus Champions approach was adapted for Project Futures from Western Michigan University's Fostering Success program,² and is now being more widely implemented to serve students across Portland's regional colleges and universities.

Mentors Serve as a Bridge to Campus Champions

In addition to providing one-on-one student-led mentoring, Project Futures mentors play an important role when they *identify and introduce students to Campus Champions*. Non-traditional students may lack a sense of familiarity or belonging on campus, which can make it more difficult to ask for help. When there is an established mentoring relationship in place, the mentors, who are knowledgeable about Campus Champions, can be a "bridge" connecting mentees to Campus Champions and the support these allies can provide.

For example, a Futures participant was struggling with a family issue that left them overwhelmed and failing a class. Since the student had an established relationship with their near-peer mentor, they were able to work on the issue together by making staying in school a goal. The mentor knew they could connect the student to a Champion in Financial Aid, and the Champion, having been trained to support underserved students, was able to explain options for taking the course again the next term. Ultimately, what could have led to the student potentially dropping out instead became an opportunity for the mentor and the Champion to highlight the support available on campus. It helped the student relieve their stress and move beyond avoidance to create a better solution.

Together, mentors and Champions create sustainable communication pathways for underserved students who may struggle to navigate higher education systems. These allies can ensure that students have access to a network of campus-based services like these:

- Tutoring or homework help
- Academic advising and financial aid
- Student housing assistance
- Student groups (e.g., LGBTQ, cultural centers, students who are parenting)
- Disability resources
- Campus events and recreation
- Counseling and other mental health resources
- Leadership and scholarship opportunities

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2. <http://fosteringsuccessmichigan.com/library/designated-campus-champions>

Recommended Strategies for Strengthening Campus Connections

Below are recommended strategies developed by Project Futures participants, near-peer coaches, and the Campus Champions. These tips are intended to support these relationships in ways that help students get the most out of program mentoring and connections across campus:

FOR MENTORS

Five steps to bridging relationships between students and Champions:

1. Take time to have an intentional discussion with your mentees about student-led goals and related challenges to academic success.
2. Narrow down student-led goals and help connect these to some action items associated with overcoming challenges and accomplishing their goals.
3. Make a plan with your mentee to identify where and how a Campus Champion could be of assistance or provide extra information and support on a goal, and offer to coach the student around asking for help from allies like Campus Champions.
4. Introduce your mentee to any Campus Champions who are in a position to help support your student's goal, and encourage ongoing connection with the Champion(s).
5. Support your mentee as needed before, during, and after meetings with Champions. Help them prepare for these conversations in advance, and afterward, make a plan for next steps following the students' lead.

FOR CAMPUS CHAMPIONS

Five steps to being a Champion:

1. Cultivate connection and relationships with students and raise awareness that you are available to provide support.
2. Remember that each student comes with a different set of pre-college experiences and understanding of higher education.
3. Take meetings with students who need extra assistance and respect the process and boundaries of at-risk students.
4. Create a mindful practice of meeting students where they are, helping mentor and mentee define best steps to achieving student-led goals.
5. Ask investigative but not leading questions if students do not know what questions to ask.

FOR STUDENTS

Five steps to "Showing Up":

1. Bring your interests, needs and ideas to meetings with your mentor.
2. Connect with your mentor and Campus Champion in support of your academic success or personal well-being.
3. Create and help cultivate supportive spaces by telling your mentors and Campus Champions things that would help you to do your best.
4. Show up with your authentic self, be real, and be honest.
5. Say if you need help or would like support at any time.

Expanding Sustainable Campus-based Support Through Mentors and Champions

These recommended strategies are based on the experience of the Project Futures team in enhancing the near-peer mentoring approach to support underserved students who experience mental health stressors, with a network of trained Campus Champions. Importantly, *these lessons can apply to campus-based student support programs in general*. If your campus has programming for students with unique needs, you may be able to enhance your impact by creating an accessible network of mentors who can help

students engage with Champions. This approach may work especially well when multiple mentoring programs develop a shared process for utilizing *Campus Champions* as a network of expertise for students to seek support around their individual goals. A collective network that utilizes mentors as a bridge to Campus Champions and student services will offer support to vulnerable students so they can “show up” with their most authentic selves, ready to learn.

If you are interested in becoming a Campus Champion at Portland State University, or if you would like to connect more about mentoring best practices, send us a message! Contact the Futures Project Manager at rtcpubs@pdx.edu.

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