PROMOTING FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE
STUDENT WELL-BEING AND
ACADEMIC RETENTION THROUGH
PEER-DELIVERED INTERVENTIONS

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Identify two ways in which enhancement of well-being among college students contributes to their academic success, persistence, and retention in college.

2. Describe two methods of designing and delivering empirically-informed peer-to-peer interventions promoting connection and a sense of belonging among first-year college students.

3. Discuss two benefits and challenges associated with developing, implementing, and evaluating peer-to-peer interventions to promote connection among college students.
WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Factors Affecting Well-Being and the Importance of Peers
FACTORS AFFECTING WELL-BEING

- Connection to peers, faculty and staff, and the broader campus community contributes to well-being among college students and is associated with improved academic outcomes.

- However, many students—particularly those from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds—report experiencing homesickness and a lack of a sense of belonging and connection to others, especially during their first year of college.

- Belongingness and homesickness are two psychosocial factors affecting college students’ health and well-being as they transition to the new social and physical environment at college.
  - Belongingness theory: All humans possess an intrinsic desire for lasting interpersonal relationships characterized by closeness and security (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).
FACTORS AFFECTING WELL-BEING

- College students who report a sense of belonging and feeling connected to others tend to report improved well-being across a wealth of health and educational outcomes
  - Students who feel connected to their campus:
    - Earn higher grades
      (Kivlghan III et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007)
    - Are more likely to graduate from college than those who perceive a lack of belonging
      (Patterson Silver Wolf, Butler-Barnes, & Van Zile-Tamsen, 2017)

- Conversely, students who feel as if they do not belong and who do not report strong social connections to others are particularly susceptible to experiencing adverse mental health outcomes, including:
  - Homesickness
  - Depression
  - Alcohol-related problems
  - Suicidal ideation
    (Watt & Badger, 2009)
    (Cole et al., 2013)
    (Lamis & Malone, 2011)
    (Ploskonka & Servaty-Seib, 2015)
Homesickness is reported relatively commonly by students:

- Nearly 70% report feeling homesick during their first year of college (Hurtado et al., 2007)

Homesickness has emerged as a significant risk factor for poor mental health and academic outcomes, such as:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Withdrawn behavior
- Academic difficulty
- Lower college GPA
- Stopping or dropping out of college

(Sun, Hagedorn, & Zhang, 2016; Thurber & Walton, 2012)
FACTORS AFFECTING WELL-BEING

- Sense of belonging and connection seem to be especially protective of mental health and of continued enrollment and degree completion for marginalized and underrepresented student populations, who have been found to be at heightened risk for reporting homesickness compared to their peers
  - Students of Color
  - First-generation college students

(Glass & Westmont, 2014; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2019; Sun, Hagedorn, & Zhang, 2016; Thelamour, George Mwangi, & Ezeofor, 2019; Verdín, Godwin, Benson, & Potvin, 2018)

- Promoting belonging and reducing homesickness on college campuses has significant implications for college student well-being and academic outcomes alike, particularly among such marginalized or at-risk student groups
THE ROLE OF PEER INTERVENTIONS

- Undergraduate students are the single most potent source of influence on undergraduate student affective and cognitive growth and development during college (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999)
- The frequency and quality of students’ interactions with peers extends to a positive association with college student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993)
- Peer influence is a key factor in determining the behavior of college students
- College students regard their peers as a credible and trusted source of information (National College Health Assessment, 2000)
- Studies have shown that peers can be as effective as professionals in delivering alcohol interventions to college students (Fromme & Corbin, 2004)
BELONGING AND RETENTION

“I feel part of the UAlbany campus community”

- Strongly Agree: 90.8%
- Strongly Disagree: 66.7%
WELL-BEING AMONG FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

Wellness Question
"Fairly often" or "Very often" responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homesick</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonely</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nervous or Stressed</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties Piling Up</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
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</table>
HOMESICKNESS AND RETENTION

“I feel homesick”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent Retained</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Very Often</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>86.7%</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
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OUR PROJECT PORTFOLIO

Ubelong@UAAlbany
PROJECT 1: UBELONG@UALBANY

WHEN: Following Summer Orientation

Who: Orientation Leaders (OLs)

HOW: Phone calls to incoming students

AREAS DISCUSSED/QUESTIONS ASKED DURING INTERACTION:
- Preparations for coming to college
- Questions the student has
- Questions the family has
- Worries
- Looking forward to...
- Interests
FINDINGS

- 469 Calls made
- 222 answered
- 208 conversations

- Students largely focused on details
  - What to bring
  - Moving in
  - Getting books
  - Bathrooms

- Concerns about making connections
  - How to make friends
  - How to join clubs
PROJECT 2: RA CONNECTIONS

WHEN: During first month of classes

Who: Resident Assistants

HOW: Brief one-on-one conversation

AREAS DISCUSSED/QUESTIONS ASKED DURING INTERACTION:

- Engagement on campus so far
- Connection with faculty
- Relationship with roommate(s)
- Sense of belonging in college community
- Safety and risk reduction
FINDINGS

- 2,274 conversations completed

- Connected with faculty: 66.4%
- Satisfied with roommate relationship: 97.5%
- Satisfied with suitemate relationship: 97.4%
- Feel sense of belonging: 98.2%
- Mindful of safety esp. around AOD: 99.4%
PROJECT 3: MIDDLE EARTH CONNECT

WHEN: Following Student Experience Survey

WHO: Middle Earth Peer Assistants

HOW: Phone calls to students who endorse homesickness

AREAS ADDRESSED/QUESTIONS ASKED DURING INTERACTION:
- Overall Experience
- Connection to University
- Social connections
- Adjustment to living away from home
- Academics
- Interests
FINDINGS

Fall 2018

- 865 indicated they felt homesick
- 314 agreed to be contacted by a peer
- 97 interventions completed
- 57 students provided information on resources

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Of students endorsing homesickness...</th>
<th>Retention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreed to be contacted</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined contact</td>
<td>81%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Of students who agreed to be contacted...</th>
<th>Retention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intervention completed</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention not completed</td>
<td>82%</td>
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CONCLUSIONS

- **Homesickness and belonging** are critical to student retention and well-being
- Peer interventions are particularly well-suited for promoting health and well-being
  - Address risk factors like homesickness
  - Increasing protective factors like belonging
- **Students** seem to benefit from initiatives that ease their transition to the university
  - May be especially helpful for students from marginalized backgrounds or first-generation college students
- **Peer interventions** can be designed and implemented to foster well-being and improve retention
- **Cost-effective and evidence-based peer interventions** can enhance student life
  - Training and supervision for peers delivering interventions is an important consideration
REFERENCES


Vehowengineering identity and belongingness predict grit for first-generation college students. *School of Engineering Education Graduate Student Series.* Paper 75. https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/enegs/75


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