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Leadership, Policy and Practices to Improve First Year College Students' Academic, Degree and Career Success

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Abstract

In transitioning to college, students face many challenges and obstacles during the first year of college Students bring an increasingly diverse set of experiences to campus. In order to develop a deeper understanding of how first-year student persist in higher education, this study explored what are the perceptions of college freshmen related to academic, degree and career support received by a peer mentor during their first semester. This study also investigated how the six factors including race, high school GPA, gender, campus residency, being a first-generation student, and the gender peer mentor impact the perception of college freshmen as related to academic, degree and career support received. Specifically, the findings indicate what difference does peer mentoring make in academic performance and career development of the first-year students. Since many first-year students are at risk of leaving college in debt and without degree completion causing stress and financial hardship, it is the intention that this study will encourage first year college student success through providing them proper academic, degree and career support. This study employed a descriptive research design. Quantitative data was collected from the College Student Mentoring Scale (Crisp, 2009) survey.

Keywords: First Year College Students, Academic, Degree and Career Support

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Introduction

Academic ability is not the only factor that predicts student success. Social and academic support from peer mentors is repeatedly reported in the literature as desired by and beneficial to first-year students (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). Shared learning experiences (Tinto, 1995) are instrumental in easing difficulties of transitioning to college and increasing the likelihood of students persisting to graduation (Goff, 2011). Young adults entering college confront a myriad of social, academic, and psychological challenges. College students face pressures to achieve, become active on campus, and explore social groups, often while coping with being away from loved ones for the first time, all obstacles that can lead to attrition. Retaining students then, becomes a fundamental priority of institutions. It is up to university leadership to look at innovative programming that will help address the roadblocks that prevent first-year students from persisting and finding success at their institutions.

Vincent Tinto (2000) promoted the concept of classroom as community, suggesting that academic engagement and social involvement should not be viewed as separate processes operating in different settings. Instead, he argued that "involving classrooms" operate as small communities within the larger campus, creating conditions that have the potential to encourage other types of involvement, social connections, quality of effort, and integration (p. 82). By working to create engaging, supportive classroom communities for first-year students within the course-embedded peer mentoring program, characterized by collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs, we move beyond the artificial distinction between students' academic lives and their out-of-classroom involvement (Chatham-Carpenter, Heistad, Licari, Moser, & Woods, 2014).

One initiative at the forefront is the influence peers have on the success of first-year students. Researchers, (Arellano & Padilla, 1996 and Hurtado, Carter & Spuler, 1996, Campbell, Smith, Dugan, & Komives, 2012) have examined students' social environment and the impact of peers on academic outcomes. Multiple models of peer mentoring are being used in first-year classes at institutions of higher education. In a comprehensive review of undergraduate peer mentoring, Barry et. al (2012) highlighted several types of programs that have evolved on college campuses since the 1970's, including using undergraduate peer teaching assistants within large lecture classes, supplemental instruction for difficult gateway courses, peer-led team study groups for math and science courses, common courses featuring peer leaders within living-learning communities, writing fellows who serve as undergraduate writing tutors across the curriculum, peer mentors within first-year success seminars, and various institution-specific peer mentoring programs. Barry et. al. (2012) identifies the key features of curricular peer-mentoring:

> ...the undergraduate peer mentor's placement or attachment to a credit course
>
> and its instructor(s), his or her identity as a near-peer to students enrolled in that course, the wide variety of peer mentoring roles that may be instructional yet differ from authoritative instruction and grading, and the existence of a program that coordinates and supports the learning of peer mentors and their host instructors. (p. 27)

Research by Chatham-Carpenter et. al. (2014) investigated tasks that peer mentors typically assist with in classrooms by surveying instructors of first-year seminar courses. Results showed that peer mentors were updating students about class information (100 %), tutoring individual students or meeting one-on-one with students (100 %), holding study sessions (100 %), providing feedback on student assignments (75%), and taking attendance (63%). Half of the instructors indicated their peer mentors teach lessons (on student success topics or class-related topics) (50 %) and facilitate group discussions (50 %). Some instructors allow their peer mentors to plan outings or out-of-class get-togethers or take students to out-of-class events (38 %).

It is apparent that the peer mentors are involved in both in-class and out-of-class activities in their first-year only classes. Based on the aforementioned research, although on the surface, it appears the peer mentors are acting as traditional peer teaching assistant might in a regular general education classroom. From this perspective however, it does not make the role of the peer mentors unique.

Next, researchers focused on first-year students whom were enrolled in the courses that had peer mentors. First-year students who were enrolled in first-year classes reported positive experiences with peer teaching assistants. A mid-term survey of 197 first-year students conducted in Fall 2013 (Chatham-Carpenter et. al., 2014) indicates 37.2 % said they had already met once with their peer mentors, and 18.9% had met two or more times with a peer mentor. Almost 60 % of the students shared their peer mentors had helped them "often" or "a lot" with study skills (59.6 %) and meeting academic challenges (53.6%), which was consistent to their first finding provided by the instructor's feedback and perspective.

Aligned with the current study and to fill the gap that exists on student perceptions, Chatham-Carpenter et. al. (2014) found the majority of students said their peer mentor had helped them with navigating campus resources (70.1 %), campus opportunities (65.4 %), campus events (62.3 %), student organizations (62 %), and the university as a whole (77 %). Additionally, 55 % of those responding said their peer mentor had helped them in their ability to talk to professors (54.9 %) and making connections with their first-year only professor (60.2 %). Nearly, 55 % of them agreed that their peer mentor had helped them connect with their classmates in their first-year only class (54.6 %), and 44.9 % said their peer mentor had helped them deal with personal concerns and issues (Chatham-Carpenter et al., 2014).

The primary aim of this research is to re-examine the perceptions of first-year students and the impact peer mentors are having on their success in college, in order to contribute further research and provide recommendations to university leadership regarding peer mentoring programs, leading to greater first-year student persistence. In order for this achievement to occur, it is vital to thoroughly understand the role of peer mentors, what their purpose is and how they are utilized to assist the progression of first-year students.

Peer Mentors and First-Year Students

Aronson and Bridegeman (1979, as cited in Falchikov, 2001) indicate peer mentors may not only support students academically, but they are often a preference of first-year students over faculty on everyday concerns and issues. First-year students reach out to peer mentors on areas of their lives that cause stress, confusion and insecurities. In fact, students that seek to connect with more experienced peers experience improved motivation, increased overall satisfaction, and an increase in positive attitudes toward themselves.

While past researchers have examined either First-Year Programs' effects on academic success or peer mentoring effects on academic success, (Casey, 2013) recent research combined the effort of First-Year Program (FYP) classes and peer mentoring by conducting a quasi-experiment to determine the added value of peer mentoring in FYP classrooms for first-year freshmen at a large metropolitan university. Casey (2013) surveyed first-year students enrolled in a first-year seminar course about the knowledge of campus resources at two different times in the semester (T1 & T2). Seventy first-year students had a peer mentor (PM) and twenty-one did not have a peer mentor (NPM). Students with a peer mentor (PM) scored significantly higher on the Knowledge of Campus Resources Questionnaire at T2 compared to their scores at T1, $t(69) = 6.29$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.81$, whereas the students without a peer mentor (NPM) did not score significantly higher at T2 when compared to T1, $t(89) = 0.86$, $p = .400$, $d = -0.25$. The results from Casey (2013), shed light on the benefit peer mentors can have in providing support for first-year students, specifically, when it comes to academic resources. First-year students may be more

accepting of the encouragement from peers to seek academic support from university resources such as writing support, tutoring and academic success centers.

As early as 1996, Topping conducted research on peer tutoring. He shared that the programs involving peer tutoring and peer mentoring were a cost-effective way to ensure that students received constructive and relevant feedback regarding their academic work despite higher student to instructor ratios. Although the majority of the literature reviewed thus far demonstrate favorable student outcomes because of peer tutoring and mentoring programs, Topping warns against viewing peer mentoring programs as a panacea to all student success issues in higher education (1996). To this point, peer mentoring programs were most effective within a highly structured academic environment. Therefore, it would be undesirable to implement programs in an unstructured manner. According to Topping (1996), peer mentoring should be research- based and deliberately planned by academic and student affairs professionals. This structure may also include faculty who teach first-year students and interact on a regular basis with peer mentors.

In addition, Ender and Kay suggest that educators should consider specific goals when implementing peer mentoring programs (2001). For example, what are the learning outcomes? How many students will be served? How many peer mentors are needed to serve the target student population? How can program administrators build-in evaluation processes to document results? Establishing these specifics ensures a systematic, proactive approach where both qualitative and quantitative outcomes can be measured. This data is critical; it provides support for the first-year program and disseminates critical areas which require more attention to training of peer mentors and FYP faculty. Program evaluation must include an assessment of student and peer mentor needs, in-depth training regarding advanced communication skills, and ability to work with a diverse range of students in terms of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, sexual orientation, religion, and culture, among other factors (Budge, 2006).

Budge (2006) also suggests peer mentors and faculty must acquire in-depth information about the use of campus resources and know when to refer students to specific help centers based on personal needs. To accomplish these goals, the peer mentor and FYP faculty training should be planned and completed prior to the start of the semester in which these programs will begin (Budge, 2006). Effective training of peer mentors and FYP faculty regarding issues of diversity is essential, as members of different ethnic, gender, age, and socioeconomic groups may feel uncomfortable working with one another because of stereotypes and historical relations between different groups (Ferrari, 2004; Jacobi, 1991). The core of both types of programs should be inclusiveness in the educational setting, so that underrepresented populations feel supported in their success by their peers and faculty.

Budge (2006) suggests that programs which are open about their commitment to supporting less-recognized populations are more likely to help their students find success. Specifically, perspective-taking and advanced listening skills should be a part of peer mentor and FYP faculty training for successful outcomes in cross-cultural mentoring (Redmond, 1990). Once the academic year begins, weekly or bi-monthly supervision meetings should occur to allow for ongoing training and troubleshooting between mentors and program directors and help to remain consistent and focused on the needs of the student population the program serves. Faculty and peer mentor relationships are important in order to address the needs of the students they interact with. However, the literature dictates that the peer-to-peer relationship can be a strong influence which can support the Psychological and Emotional Support of the first-year student (Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013).

Degree and Career Support

The importance of obtaining a college degree has become more prevalent in recent years. Despite this, universities still face retention issues and pushback from individuals and families due to significant increases in tuitions rates for two and four-year institutions. Considering that more employment settings

are requiring workers to have higher levels of education (Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri & Murdock, 2013), individuals without a college degree may have decreased opportunities to pursue various career options. Furthermore, census data from 2012, indicated that the median income for full-time working individuals over the age of 25 with a bachelor's degree or more education is approximately 35 % to 43 % higher than the median income for individuals with a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Additionally, college graduates have substantially higher rates of securing employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Ng et al.'s (2005 as cited in Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri & Murdock, 2013) found through a meta-analysis study, support for the relationship between educational attainment and career success. Similar results were mirrored by Converse, Pathak, DePaul-Haddock, Gotliband and Merbedone (2012) which emphasized education as an important moderator between individual characteristics and factors related to career development. Researchers also hypothesized that academic performance and success are integral to educational attainment, and therefore are connected to career development (Converse et al., 2012). Furthermore, if peer mentors can support first-year students as they navigate through their academic programs the progression to graduation may be less stressful and more of an interactive process as opposed to a confusing requirement.

Academic Subject Knowledge Support

The path to student success incorporates a variety of factors that influence the journey a student takes while transitioning from high school to college. Leaders in higher education question what factors ensure students at their institutions impact them reaching their highest potential. Habley (2004, as cited in Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon & Hawthorne, 2013) stated that the value and worth of an interaction between a student and an involved professional on campus, which is often through academic advising, is a major contributor to retention. However, the effect of academic advising on student achievement has been largely overshadowed by attempts to evaluate student satisfaction with the advising process (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Hemwall & Trachte, 2003; Light, 2001; Propp & Rhodes, 2006).

Tinto's (1975, 2006) model was one of the first to identify institutional features as contributors to student attrition. This differed from previous efforts that suggested student retention and success focused solely on student characteristics, Tinto connected the relationship between the institution of higher education and the student as an important element of student achievement. The model identified five areas needed in order to establish a supportive college environment: expectation, advice, support, involvement, and learning (Tinto, 1975, 2006). While faculty-student interactions are related to students' academic goals and outcomes, student development is guided by a variety of interconnected institutional efforts outside of course-related connections with faculty (Kuh, 2001). Therefore, researching additional components of higher education that seamlessly combine the overall academic experience may provide key institutional stakeholders and student development teams foundations to facilitate development of supportive environments for students. In a statement on academic advising, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA, 2018) encouraged a holistic approach to advising which includes both understanding the institution and the needs of its students. Stuart-Hunter and White (2004) echoed this by stating that academic advising assists students in developing meaningful learning experiences, which encourage achievement of educational, career, and life goals.

Tinto (1975, 2010) argued that students are more likely to thrive and graduate from institutions that are clear and consistent about expectations and requirements for that particular environment. Academic advisors can be essential resources in interpreting these expectations and communicate them to students in a way that leads to paths of degree completion, thereby meeting student and institutional goals. Without adequate, accurate and quality advising, students may grasp course content, but still be at risk of dropping out if they "fail to develop adequate academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment,

achievement motivation, and social support and involvement" (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004, p.10).

The advising process, if done properly can provide students the ability to self-identify their specific educational and career goals (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). This information can help shape and decide a student's academic course selection and pave the way for co-curricular activities that enhance their overall college experience. Student involvement is heightened through engagement with activities such as practicums (Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999), undergraduate research (Bauer & Bennett, 2003; Ishiyama, 2002), and community service learning projects (McKay & Estrella, 2008; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Superior academic advising provides opportunity for students to explore and participate in co-curricular activities that promote active engagement with personal aspirations and institutional retention goals.

In 1980, Bean developed the Model of Student Development, based on organizational theory about attrition of employees, Bean states that students possess certain characteristics that impact their perceptions and interactions with the educational institution, perceiving objective measures, such as grade point average or belonging to campus organizations, as well as subjective measures, such as practical value of the education and the quality of the institution. These variables, are in turn, expected to influence the degree to which the student is satisfied with the institution.

Bean and Eaton (2001) elaborate on the set of structures and practices that institutions are notorious for, often called "the bureaucracy", and their effect on first-year retention and learning. Research has been minimal in this area, but future studies could focus on the attendance policies, academic advising, first-year seminars, and effective grading methods. Research conducted by Sparkman, Maulding and Roberts (2012) measured student retention and achievement (cumulative grade point average), with data from the completion of the fifth year of enrollment. Variables include High School GPA, composite ACT scores, gender, ethnicity, first generations college student status, and emotional intelligence using a correlational design. This research found that the demographic most likely to graduate are white females, who are not dating, live on campus during their first semester and have had one or both parents who have earned a four-year degree. Additionally, they found that there are limited resources available to first generation college students which may cause a delay in graduation. The results from Sparkman, Maulding and Roberts (2012) shed light on the demographics that traditionally find success. The current study will look at similar demographics examining the addition of a peer mentor to determine if those student leaders impact the success of particularly at-risk first-year students. Moreover, this research will provide insight as to whether first-year students find value in the concept of a role model, and if a peer mentor is considered to be that role model. In other words, does the parental factor found by Sparkman, Maulding and Roberts (2012) matter, or can a student leader be the role model that has an impact on first-year student success?

Methodology

Peer mentoring has become a fundamental program in institutions of higher education. These programs help train student leaders called Peer Mentors, to assist and lead freshman through their first year of college. Peer Mentors become part of initiatives to holistically navigate first-year students and aid in the transition to college. This study examined the relationship between peer mentors and student success as related to the College Student Mentoring Scale (Crisp, 2009). Specific evaluation to the interrelated constructs of Psychological and Emotional Support, and the Existence of a Role Model were considered. Finally, selected demographic factors were analyzed to interpret the impact they have on the perceptions of first-year college students.

The methodology section contains a detailed description of the research design and the sample selection process, including data collection and analysis. Additionally, the role of the researcher, validity and reliability justifications, limitations and delimitations are considered.
This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the perceptions of college freshmen related to Degree and Career Support received by a peer mentor during their first semester?
    a. What are the low and high responses of college freshmen related to Degree and Career Support received by a peer mentor?
    b. What factors impact the perception of college freshmen as related to Degree and Career Support received by a peer mentor?
2. What are the perceptions of college freshmen related to the Academic Support as received by a peer mentor?
    a. What are the low and high responses of college freshmen related to the Academic Support as received by a peer mentor?
    b. What factors impact the perceptions of college freshmen as related to the Academic Support received by a peer mentor?

Research Approach and Design

This study employed a descriptive and correlational research design. Quantitative data was collected from the College Student Mentoring Scale (Crisp, 2009) survey. The rationale for using a correlational research design is, there is a need to determine the extent of a relationship between two or more variables (Creswell, 2013). These variables are Academic Support, Degree and Career Support. This design was appropriate for this study because it (a) looked at the relationship between the variables - not past or future performance of participants, (b) the data was collected at one point in time, (c) all participants' responses were analyzed as a group and (d) finally, the researcher made interpretations from the statistical test results (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection: Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a public, state, four-year institution located in an urban community. The university is a fully accredited institution of higher education. Based on the institutional archived data from the beginning of the 2017 academic year total student population was over 7.000 of which 6.830 were undergraduates. During the fall 2017 semester there were over 1.387 first-year students. The population was invited to participate in this study consisted of new college freshmen who were enrolled in a freshmen seminar course which included a peer mentor in each section of the course. The First-Year Experience (FYE) coordinates the freshmen seminar course for all new, incoming first year students. The FYE program at the institution frequently collects data to assess program initiatives to better serve its first-year students. The FYE program uses electronic communication with first-year students to deploy surveys and other assessment tools several times a semester. This study utilized and analyzed existing data from the FYE program which was collected. A total of 710 students participated with 266 completing the survey and became the convenience sample for the study.

The respondents were 32.3 % male and 67.7 % female. The race of the respondents was 20.3 % Black/African American, 553.4 % White/Caucasian, 16.5% Hispanic/Latino, 3.8% Asian/Pacific Islander and 6 % responded "other". The percentage of students living on campus was 57.1 % on-campus and 42.9 % commuter student. Furthermore, 39.5 % were first-generation students. In regard to the Peer Mentor gender, 15.8 % of students reported having a male peer mentor and 84.2 % reported having a female peer mentor.

Details of instrumentation and data collection tool: College Student Mentoring Scale (CSMS)

The College Student Mentoring Scale is a 25-item survey designed to measure students' perceptions of mentoring support they receive during college (Crisp, 2009). This survey was used as the main data collection tool. An email was sent to the creator of the CSMS asking to use the survey in this study. Permission was received by email before the survey was implemented and distributed to the participants. In this study the survey specifically measures two types of interrelated constructs: (1) Academic Support, (2) and the Degree and Career Support. Each domain addresses the one of four interrelated constructs mentioned above and are described as follows. Participants were instructed to rate responses to questions by the indicating "5"- strongly agree, "4" – agree, "3" – neutral, "2" – disagree and "1" – strongly disagree.

Survey Items

In this study, Degree and Career Support and Academic questions from CSMS are analyzed. The Degree and Career Support domain included an assessment of the student's strength, weaknesses, abilities, and includes assistance with setting academic/career goals and decision-making. The second academic support domain centered on the acquisition of necessary skills and knowledge; on educating, evaluating, and challenging the student academically; on employing tutoring skills and focusing on subject learning in contrast to mentoring that focuses on life learning; and on establishing a teaching-learning process.

Since there is relevant archived data available from the FYE program, the researcher submitted an IRB application in accordance with guidelines and procedures in order to use the archived data and receive the required consent and permission. The requirements of the Institutional Review Board were followed by the researcher. Participant confidentiality is of the utmost importance along with maintaining the data securely. Survey responses were coded to maintain confidentiality so that only institutional officials have access to each person's identity.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The College Student Mentoring Scale was used to collect data (Crisp, 2009). This survey was evaluated, and questions were analyzed by professional in the FYE program and determined to be suitable for distribution. Crisp's (2009) CSMC has been utilized due to its strong face and construct validity across four sub-scale domains that are each independent factor for perceptions of college students.

The internal consistency of the items measuring each of the four constructs was established by calculating Cronbach coefficient alphas. Cronbach coefficient alphas for each of the latent variables were found to be substantial (i.e., greater than .80). The value of coefficient alpha for Degree and Career Support was .90, indicating the factor was highly reliable. Substantial reliability results for latent variables were also found for Academic Subject Knowledge Support (α = .883). The items measuring each of the constructs were found to be reliable, indicating the participants respond consistently across the items designed to measure the latent constructs.

Data Analysis Plan: Variables and Coding

The independent variables (demographic factors) and dependent variables (two domains, i.e., Degree and Career Support, and the Academic Support) are analyzed according to the research questions. The

dependent variables are be measured according to the perceived impact of peer mentoring utilizing the CSMS.

Dependent Variables

As noted in the introduction, this study was guided by two main research questions. The findings of these research questions will help leaders of higher education, faculty, staff, student leaders and other key stakeholders understand how they are supporting the Academic Support, and Degree/Career Support to first-year college freshmen. To determine the minimum and maximum score for each domain the number of questions were multiplied by the given response to the survey question. For Degree and Career Support a total of six questions were asked, with a minimum score of 6 and a maximum score of 30. The next domain, Academic Subject Knowledge has a totaled five questions with a minimum score is 5 and a maximum score of 25.

Independent Variables

The independent variables that have possible implications on students' perception of the impact of peer mentors are summarized in Table 1, which illustrates the independent variables and coding. The variables used to look at the impact are student, gender, race, campus resident, first-generation college students, High School GPA, and peer mentor gender. The researcher chose these specific variables to highlight as particular interest of the impact of these variables may influence the future recruitment efforts of peer mentoring programs. Moreover, it is the interest of the researcher to understand if these variables have an impact on the mentoring experience from both the mentee and the mentor.

Additionally, first-generation college students more frequently encounter specific obstacles that compromise their academic success as compared to non-first-generation students. Peer mentoring programs have demonstrated their effectiveness with first-generation students and other historically underserved student groups, often pairing upper-class students with entering first-year students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Wilson & Arendale, 2011 as cited in Stebleton & Soria, 2013). For these reasons, the researcher will focus the impact of these specific demographic areas on college freshmen perceptions.

Table 1
Independent Variables

Variable	**Coding**
Student Gender	Male =1 Female =2 Other =3
Student Race	Black/African American =1, White/Caucasian=2, Hispanic/Latino=3, Asian/Pacific Islander=4, Other=5
Student Campus Resident	Yes=1, No=2
First Generation College Student	Yes=1, No=2
High School GPA	0-5
Peer Mentor Gender	Male=0, Female=1, Other=2

The researcher looked at six independent variables as potential factors that would that would be impactful on first-year student success. These factors were based on institutional data that are regularly collected from the First-Year Experience. They were also considered because of the specific data they could provide to university leadership looking to implement or improve peer mentoring programs for First-Year students.

Statistical Analysis

The research design and methods for this study derived from existing data collection which employ quantitative research methods in order to evaluate the impact of peer mentoring on first-year college students. Aligned with the research questions, the quantitative data was collected and analyzed to determine the impact peer mentors have on first-year student success, particularly, in the areas of Academic, Degree and Career Support and the total mentoring score. High numbers/values were used for a score of "5" and low numbers were used to code "1". The responses were uploaded into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

Descriptive statistics were run for each of the questions. In addition, high and low responses for each along with comparisons were evaluated. Frequency distribution is a count of the number of times each score on a single variable occurs. Frequencies and measures of central tendency (mean and standard deviation) were calculated by SPSS and appropriate tables were created for all items on the CSMS.

Inferential statistics for relationships among peer mentoring and the four domains of the CSMS were used. To explore the impact of the factors Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) was used as the main statistical test conducted. The purpose of MLR is to investigate the extent to which a single continuous dependent (criterion) variable is predicted by several continuous or categorical independent (predictor) variable. For example, this study examined the relationship between Psychosocial and Emotional Support (dependent variable) and gender, race, and first-generation students (independent variables) to see if each has an impact on the domain. This study used other inferential statistics such as Independent t-test as needed when the data warranted further investigation.

For each research question, descriptive statistics, multiple linear regression and an independent t-test was run. This allowed the researcher to establish mean scores, high and low responses related to the mean of each dependent variable. Following the descriptive statistics, multiple linear regression was run for each research question. Additional inferential statistics were run by way of an independent t-test for each research question. This allowed the researcher to compare the two means for factors that potentially impact the dependent variable.

Findings

Research Question 1: Degree and Career Support

This research question asked, "what are the perceptions of college freshmen related to Degree and Career Support received by a peer mentor during their first semester?" Participants were asked to rank survey questions on a Likert-type scale between 1 and 5 to determine perceptions toward peer mentor influence on Degree and Career Support given to freshmen in college. The total score was relatively high, M= 4.01 (SD= .90). Therefore, participants of this study showed a high level of affirmation for peer mentors providing Degree and Career Support to college.

In addition, the researcher found that some items fell below the mean. These items included, "Helps me carefully examine my degree options" M= 3.98 (SD= 1.05) which was slightly below the total mean. Items furthest from the total mean were, "Discusses the implications of my degree choice" M= 3.96 (SD= 1.05) and "Helps me to consider the sacrifices associated with my chosen degree" M= 3.93 (SD= 1.05), suggesting that college first-year freshmen were least confident that peer mentors would impact this area of career and degree support.

Consequently, there were three questions respondents scored above the mean. These questions range from slightly higher scoring to stronger support and suggest that the participants found greater impact

from their peer mentors in respect to these questions. These items produced higher responses from students taking the survey. The question which was closest to the mean was "Questions my assumptions by guiding me through a realistic appraisal of my skills" *M*= 4.02 (*SD*= 1.05). Another item "Helps me realistically examine my degree options" *M*= 4.08 (*SD*= .97) showed a greater level of support for peer mentors. Lastly, the question "encourages me to consider educational opportunities" *M*= 4.15 (*SD*= .98), showed the highest support. It is important to recognize this as it indicates peer mentors are indeed having an impact on the way first-year students view their chosen (or uncertain) degree path. Table 2 represents the questions asked in the area of Degree and Career Support and also illustrates the low and high responses.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Degree and Career Support (n=266)
When in College, I have had a Peer Mentor who…

	Mean	**Std. Deviation**
Encourages me to consider educational opportunities	4.15	.98
Helps me realistically examine my degree options	4.08	.97
Questions my assumptions by guiding me through a realistic appraisal of my skills	4.02	1.05
Total Mean Score	**4.01**	**.90**
Helps me carefully examine my degree options	3.98	1.05
Discusses the implications of my degree choice	3.96	1.05
Helps me to consider the sacrifices associated with my chosen degree	3.93	1.05

Again, the researcher explored how the six factors of race, High School GPA, gender, campus resident, first generation student, and peer mentor gender (Table 1) impact the perception of college freshmen as related to Degree and Career Support received by a peer mentor. The data was analyzed utilizing multiple linear regression and was inputted into SPSS. According to the results of the F-test (ANOVA) and Model Summary data, the total model was not significant, R^2 = .01, F (7, 258) = 36, p > .05 as the results provided in Table 3 show all six predictor variables were not significantly contributing to the prediction of criterion variable which is Degree and Career Support.

Table 3
Regression Analysis Summary for Variables Predicting Degree and Career Support

Variable	***B***	***SE B***	***β***	***t***
Race	.06	.12	.03	.50
HS GPA	.04	.14	.01	.28
Gender	.11	.12	.05	.89
Campus Resident	.01	.11	.01	.15
First Gen student	.06	.12	.03	.55
Peer mentor	-.05	.15	-.02	-.35

Note. R^2= .10 (*n*=266, *p* *<.05)

The researcher was interested in exploring the single importance of race on the participant's perceptions on Degree and Career Support because it is important to university leaders to understand the needs of underrepresented populations. It was assumed that race may have an impact on the perceptions of first year students. Johnson, Gans, Kerr and LaValle (2010) found a student's background is directly linked to their view of success. This then became the reason for the exploration into race. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare Degree and Career Support with participants race, with African

American, Hispanic/Latino, Pacific Islander Students and White/Caucasian students. There was a no significant difference in the scores for Students of Color (*M*= 3.96, *SD*= .82) and for White/Caucasian students (*M*= 4.04, *SD*= .95) in the area of Degree and Career Support.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for Degree and Career Support by Race

Race		n	Mean	Std. Deviation
Degree and Career Support	Students of Color	98	3.96	.82
	White/Caucasian	168	4.04	.95

n=266, p<.05*

Research Question 2: Academic Subject Knowledge Support

In alignment with the first research question, this question asked, "what are the perceptions of college freshmen related to Academic Subject Knowledge Support as received by a peer mentor during their first semester?" Again, these items as part of the Likert-type survey were scored on a scale between 1 and 5. The total mean for the area of Academic Subject Knowledge Support was high, *M*= 4.19 (*SD*= .83). Therefore, it is noted that participants felt confident in the support they had received by peer mentors in this area. Once again, some items in the domain fell above and below the total mean, which underscores the level of influence participants felt peer mentors provided in this area.

For instance, two items dropped below the mean. These questions were, "helps me work toward achieving my academic aspirations" *M*= 4.16 (*SD*= .96) and "helps perform to the best of my abilities" *M*= 4.13 (*SD*= .95). This means that students did not feel as confident in the peer mentors support of these items. However, three items rose above the mean. The first question in this area, "provides ongoing support about the work I do in my classes" was above the mean, *M*= 4.22 (*SD*= .93). The second question, "encourages me to discuss problems I am having with my coursework" also had higher scores, *M*= 4.24 (*SD*= .94). Finally, the third question, "provides practical suggestions for improving my academic record" soared above the total mean, *M*= 4.25 (*SD*= .92). Clearly, students felt most confident in the support received by peer mentors in these three items. Table 5 provides an illustration of the items in this area.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistic for Academic Subject Knowledge Support(N=266)
When in College, I have had a Peer Mentor who…

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Provides practical suggestions for improving my academic record	4.25	.92
Encourages me to discuss problems I am having with my coursework	4.24	.94
Provides ongoing support about the work I do in my classes	4.22	.93
Total Mean Score	**4.19**	**.83**
Helps me work toward achieving my academic aspirations	4.16	.96
Helps me perform to the best of my abilities	4.13	.95

Again, the researcher examined race, High School GPA gender, campus resident, first-generation student, and peer mentor gender impact the perception of college freshmen as related to Academic Subject

Knowledge Support received by a peer mentor. Using multiple linear regression, the data was analyzed and was inputted into SPSS. According to the results of the F-test (ANOVA) and Model Summary data, the total model was not significant, (R^2 = .04, F (7, 258) = 1.5, p > .05). As the results provided in Table 15 show, all six predictor variables were not significantly contributing to the prediction of criterion variable which is Academic Subject Knowledge Support.

Table 6
Regression Analysis Summary for Variables Predicting Academic Subject Knowledge Support

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*t*
Race	.05	.10	.03	.48
HS GPA	.12	.13	.06	.97
Gender	.20	.11	.11	1.81
Campus Resident	.14	.10	.08	1.34
First Gen student	.13	.11	.07	1.19
Peer Mentor	-.14	.14	-.06	-1.04

Note. R^2= .04 (n=266, p*< .05)

The results from the multiple linear regression found that student gender had highest *B* value compared to all other factors. The researcher then decided to then look further into this factor which was analyzed by conducting an independent t-test to investigate if the participants gender had a significant impact on perceptions as it pertains to Academic Subject Knowledge Support received by the peer mentor. The researcher chose to follow-up with this factor in particular because of the marginal impact gender showed on the multiple linear regression analysis.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare Academic Subject Knowledge Support with participant's gender. There was a significant difference in the scores for male students (M=4.03, SD=.91 and for female students (M=427, SD=.78) conditions; t (266) =-2.19, p = .01. Additionally, the effect size as measured by d was 0.04, a value that can be considered small. The researcher understands that although small, there is evidence of a difference between the male and female groups, indicating that the participants gender does make a difference when considering perceptions of support received by peer mentors in Academic Subject Knowledge Support. Female students had a higher perception *M*= 4.27 (*SD*=.78) as compared to male students *M*=4.03 (*SD*= .91). Table 7 below illustrates the findings for gender in the area of Academic and Subject Knowledge.

Table 7
Descriptive Statistics for Academic Subject Knowledge Support by Student Gender

	Gender	n	Mean	Std. Deviation
Academic Subject Knowledge Support	Male	86	4.03	.91
	Female	180	4.27	.78

n=266, p<.05*

Discussion

Degree and Career Support

An area on the College Student Mentoring Scale (Crisp, 2009), was that of Degree and Career Support. The questions on the survey that focused on this area were meant to assess the participants strengths,

weaknesses, abilities as it pertains to their degree and career choices. It also evaluates any assistance the participants receive with setting academic/career goals and decision-making strategies.

Encouraging Realistic Opportunities in Degree and Career Choices

This study asked participants to rate questions regarding the Degree and Career Support they received from their peer mentors. For many first-year students, transitioning into college and the stressors that go along with it are more than enough to handle (Goff, 2011). It is easy to understand that the idea of picking a major and deciding on a career path can be daunting to these students. The questions asked related to Degree and Career Support that, to some extent, first-year students are interested in the assistance from their peer mentors. Questions such as, "When in college I have had a peer mentor who, encourages me to consider educational opportunities and helps me realistically examine my degree options." In this study, some of the peer mentors share the same major with their mentee's. Having a peer who has gone through the introductory courses of a particular degree program can be valuable to a first-year student who may be wondering if they made the correct choice in degree selection. Converse et al. (2012) found there is a linkage between academic performance and degree attainment. Participants in this study are able to see first-hand what type of requirements are needed for their degree program. Having a peer mentor who has gone through the beginning steps and is continuing to go through a program can prove to be an exceptional resource for first-year students.

First-year students are just starting off and are faced with the task of declaring a major and thinking about what career they see themselves in. As the title of this section suggests, for many finding realistic encouragement for degree and career choices is an opportunity to direct them on the right path to success. First-year students look to their peer mentor for guidance on what those realistic expectations are for the degree choice they choose because they have had experience in those courses.

Reasoning and Sacrifices Associated with Degree and Career Choices

Research has shown that the importance of obtaining a college degree is more imperative than ever before especially for employment reasons (Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri & Murdock, 2013). This may not be an easy nor an appropriate conversation for peer mentors to have. Rather, this may be an opportunity for professional counselors to come in and address concerns first-years students may have. Possibly, this could be why participants in this study had lower responses to questions that asked, "When in college, I have had a peer mentor who discusses implications of my degree choice and helps me consider the sacrifices associated with my chosen degree." If peer mentors are not having these conversations with students, then they would be less likely find them impactful in this way. Peer mentors in this study range in academic year from sophomores to seniors. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that a sophomore peer mentor has less information on a given major or degree program as compared to a senior who is closer to starting their career.

Although peer mentors can be influential on first-year student choices on degree and career path because they themselves are in the requirements for majors, they are not necessarily discussing the reasoning and sacrifices associated with degree and career choices, as implied by the section title. These conversations then, are left to faculty, staff and professionals to reinforce the worth of the implications and sacrifices associated with a particular degree or career choice.

Understanding the Impact of Race on First-Year Students Perceptions

Literature has shown that a student's ethnic, socioeconomic and cultural background can have an influence on views of university success. Johnson, Gans, Kerr and LaValle (2010) found a student's socioeconomic background is directly linked to their view of success. This population requires more university resources to ensure success as it is most likely to be students who are underprepared, under-represented and under supported (Petty, 2014). This study looked at factors that would impact the participants perception of support received by their peer mentor in the areas of Degree and Career Support. A multiple linear regression showed no such impact. However, because the researcher has a real interest in under-represented populations and independent sample t-test was conducted to look at the influence of race on first-year student perceptions. This study showed there was no significant difference in perceptions for underrepresented populations. The university used in this study is providing the same type of connections to all first-year students in such a way that the students ethnic, socioeconomic and cultural background does not influence the results. This should be viewed as a positive outcome. Furthermore, the peer mentors in this study are trained on issues of diversity and learn to communicate effectively with all students enrolled in the course.

Implications for Leadership, Policy and Practice to Improve Degree and Career Support

It is clear from the literature that degree completion is essential now in order to find work after graduation. The U.S. Census Bureau (2018) reported that in 2012, individuals with a bachelor's degree found full-time work and their income was 35 %-45 % higher than that of people with only a high school diploma. From an economic standpoint, this statistic is important. Individuals who earn a college degree contribute more to the overall economy and build stronger communities as opposed to those graduating with only a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). These statistics are evidence that a college education is imperative to securing employment.

The researcher had looked specifically into the factor of race and degree and support. It was assumed that race may have an impact on student perceptions and was not supported in the findings. Therefore, the results in this area indicated that race was not a predicting factor in Degree and Career Support. The implications for policy and practice then, were developed from the high and low responses which were a better representation of the participants perceptions.

From a practice standpoint, and specific to this study, the peer mentors can only take this conversation so far. They themselves are students looking to complete a degree. To this point, faculty and staff can play a major role in motivating students to continue to degree completion. The researcher specifically looked at student race within this area for this study. Although there was not a significant difference in perceptions the literature suggests that if faculty and staff find ways to open communication with their students and assist with goal setting less-recognized populations are more likely to persist (Budge, 2006). Moreover, students want to succeed, but many begin college and struggle to access the resources, information and advisement that promotes success (Strayhorn, 2015). If key stakeholders can bring these resources to students either in the classroom or through campus involvement graduation rates may rise.

Similarly, from a leadership perspective, the focus on changing policy can be to incorporate career counseling into the curriculum for first-year students. University and colleges typically have Career Centers, but more often than not they focus in upper classman frequently waiting until junior year to reach out to students who by that time should be settled in a degree program. However, if students are reached in their first-year, and are able to explore different majors along with learning about career opportunities within that major students can make more informed decisions and would be more likely to find a path to follow. At the university used in this study there is a new Office of Career and Professional Development that promises to bring programming into the first-year. This would be a

beneficial addition to the programming taking place in the First-Year Seminar class the participants were involved in. Further research into the benefits of utilizing career services professionals with first-year students would provide more insight into this relatively untouched area of first-year student programming.

Academic Subject Knowledge Support

The area of Academic and Subject knowledge focused on the necessary skills and knowledge on educating, evaluating, and challenging the student academically. Questions in this area also centered on students employing tutoring skills and focusing on subject learning in contrast to mentoring that focuses on life learning and on establishing a teaching-learning process. Respondents results are discussed below.

Practical Advising for Educational Achievement in Academic and Subject Knowledge

The participants in this study were asked questions that were directly related to the academic support they receive during their first semester. Out of the five questions on the survey related to this topic, three of the questions were rated highly, indicating first-year student at this university are feeling supported by their peer mentor. An example of the questions asked are as follows: "When in college I have had a peer mentor who, provides practical suggestions for improving my academic record." Research by Chatham-Carpenter et. al. (2014) looked at the typical responsibilities a peer mentor has in a first-year seminar course. The results of this research showed that peer mentors were updating students about class information (100 %), tutoring individual students or meeting one-on-one with students (100 %), holding study sessions (100 %), providing feedback on student assignments (75 %). Peer mentors are encouraging first-year students and are facilitating academic focused activities.

Comparable to this study, respondents' scores indicated they perceived their peer mentors as supportive in their academic and subject knowledge. Peer mentors are viewed as the first resource for first-year students in the first-year seminar course. Additionally, they are seen as less intimidating than faculty, so first-year students reach out to them first.

Another question that participants rated highly stated, "When in college I have had a peer mentor who, encourages me to discuss problem I am having with my coursework." Colvin and Ashman (2010) found that students rely on more experienced students for support. They seek guidance from their peers regarding decisions on classes and academic challenges. This then, supports the higher ratings participants showed in this area.

In the program used in this study, peer mentors often provide study skills or time management type workshops that can assist students when they are struggling in courses. First-year students are engaged regularly with their peer mentors so asking for help with a course topic, assignment or even how to study for an exam is less intimidating.

Participants in this study indicated high responses regarding the practical suggestions for improving their academic record they receive from their peer mentor. As indicated in the section title, peer mentors are supporting first-year students as they are making decisions about classes and seeking academic advisement.

Working toward Achieving Academic Goals

There were only two questions in this area that were rated slightly lower than the rest. These questions focused on achieving and performing academic goals. Participants were asked, "When in college I have

had a peer mentor who helps me work toward achieving my academic aspiration and helps me perform to the best of my abilities." Although they were rated slightly lower they, still showed substantial confidence in the peer mentors influence in this area.

The literature supports the concept of peer mentors can be a helping hand for first-year students as they make the transition to collegiate level academics which is often very different from how it was in high school (Strayhorn, 2015). Furthermore, Kolb and Kolb (2005) understand that academic ability is not the only contributing factor that influences academic success in higher education; it also comes in the form if essential critical thinking, improved study skill and time management processes. Moreover, Strayhorn (2015) affirms that students want to succeed at the university level; however, most come in without the proper academic preparation and end up struggling to access resources, information and advisement that enable success. In a very subtle way, the lower responses in this study indicate that the participants here entered college without having the essential tools for success.

It is noteworthy to understand that the peer mentors in this program are trained to assist students when they are having trouble in their academic courses. Peer mentors are aware of a variety of resources available to students and are knowledgeable themselves on strategies that assist students get through their courses. For example, peer mentors in some of the First-Year Experience courses are allowed ten minutes of time at the end of class to discuss any issues, concerns or problems. Similar to research done by, (Casey, 2013) found peer mentors provided an added value to the classroom experience by providing knowledge of campus resources and offering support and encouragement to academic resources such as writing assistant and tutoring services, the findings in this research support that. With these approaches to academic achievement, first-year students are able to feel confident in the courses they are in, which is particularly important in the first-year of college.

Gender Differences on Perception of Academic Subject Knowledge Support

Similar to other areas of the College Student Mentoring Scale (Crisp, 2009) a multiple linear regression was run. The variable of gender stood out and further investigation was done by conducting an independent t-test. The results of this test found that female participants had a perception in regard to the influence the peer mentor had on Academic Subject Knowledge Support. These results align with literature conducted by Sparkman, Maulding and Roberts (2012), which measured achievement (cumulative grade point average), with data from the completion of the fifth year of enrollment. Variables include High School GPA, composite ACT scores, gender, ethnicity, first generations college student status, and emotional intelligence using a correlational design. Similar to the current study, they found the demographic most likely to graduate are females (Sparkman, Maulding & Roberts, 2012). Additionally, work done by Crisp (2010) showed there are differences among the college experiences of both male and female students, with women perceiving the experience significantly more.

This too, was the case in this study which found female participants had a higher level of confidence in the peer mentors in their classes. Perhaps this is because more female students participated in the survey, as compared to male students. However, it may also be because there are more female peer mentors enrolled in this program. Gender to gender and cross- gender communication can also be a factor in the results of this study.

Implications for Leadership, Policy and Practice to Improve Academic Subject Knowledge Support

Implications to discuss in terms of policy and practice should come from embracing the concept of active learning to incorporate many different areas in a student's learning process.

From a policy perspective, key stakeholders could refer to Tinto's model of retention (1995, 2006). This model suggests that in order to promote student persistence, university leaders and stakeholders need to consider program implementation, aiding in student persistence. It is not enough to simply identify the need for action, stakeholders must find a way to implement to ensure student retention and persistence to graduation. Peer mentoring is a prime example of such implementation. Many institutions identify the need, but little follow through with full implementation is done (Tinto, 2006).

From a practice perspective, more needs to be done in the area of academic advising from university leaders. While faculty-student interactions are related to students' academic goals and outcomes, student development is often directed by a variety of interconnected institutional efforts outside of course-related connections with faculty (Kuh, 2001). Therefore, researching additional components of higher education that seamlessly combine the overall academic experience may provide key institutional stakeholders and student development teams foundations to develop more supportive environments for students. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA, 2018) promotes a holistic approach to advising which includes both understanding the institution and the needs of its students. Echoed by Stuart-Hunter and White (2004), academic advising assists students in developing meaningful learning experiences, which encourages achievement of educational, career, and life goals.

At the university in which the program was analyzed, faculty who teach the first-year seminar course are trained in using different campus resources for advising students on academic goals. Additionally, the peer mentors in this program work closely with faculty to develop programming and out-of-class experiences which enhance the institutional experience for the student. Moreover, and in recent years, this university has relaunched its Academic Success Center which not only employs student affairs professionals but has student leaders who are certified tutors, success coaches and peer mentors. In addition, the university in this study has embraced the active learning approach as well as addressing students holistically and had collaboratively joined together professionals from both academic affairs and student affairs to meet the needs of students. This innovative and comprehensive programming has started to change the outcomes for first-year students for the better.

For higher education leaders at this university understanding the importance to find ways to connect with the evolving demographics and learning needs of the entering first-year students is critical. This university currently uses peer mentors to assist with the implementation of programming in the first-year. However, this addition is relatively new. Thus, from a leadership perspective, university officials should look to models of retention to understand the components that can keep students at the university, especially when it comes to academic and subject support. Faculty need to become a key player, while allowing peer mentors to partner in the mission.

The results from this area are in alignment with the researcher's assumption that gender is a predicting factor of perceptions and female students would have higher perceptions than male students. The findings support the researcher's assumptions. The recommendations for practice and policy are inclusive to all students rather than specifically female students. In order for university leadership to provide holistic engagement to first-year students, it must be inclusive.

Although this study did not look at gender effect per se, the finding indicated a strong response from female first-year students. It would be important to look further into why female students responded

higher than male students. Future research and university leadership could focus more on including strategies for male identifying students.

Conclusion and Link the Findings to a Theoretical Framework

The area of Degree and Career Support is a relevant and connective component to the holistic treatment around student success. The value thinking about degree and career goals are important even in the first year. The questions that focused on Degree and Career Support reflected on the participants' interpretations and thoughts regarding essentials for completing a degree program. The questions also spoke to time devoted and sacrifices necessary to complete a degree. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977) aligns well with this area. This theory centers on an individual's belief in one's own ability to achieve a goal. It is a theory based on motivation and performance, both needed to complete a degree and fulfill career aspirations.

Moreover, this study did not find a significant difference in responses based on student race. However, under represented students may be interested in Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977) as it is promoting positive outcomes by setting personal goals and working toward achieving them. As mentioned previously, the peer mentors in this study are trained to motivate and help all students achieve success. The findings provide an effective foundation to the area of Academic Subject Knowledge Support. It allows the domain to really be studied both on its own and within the conceptual structure that creates the holistic view of the student. However, it is necessary to look toward the wholistic approach to make inferences on how students perceived peer mentors in this area.

There are two theorists that align well with this study. The first, Tinto's model of retention (1995, 2006) states students involved in collaborative learning programs, learning with and from peers will be involved in a wider range of learning activities, learn more, and persist at a higher rate than students in more traditional learning settings. Furthermore, he determined students in shared learning experiences find academic and social support for their learning among peers and they become more actively engaged in their learning. The participants in this study are able to work with the peer mentor in a way that gets them actively involved in their own learning process. In this case, active learning becomes the method of choice for understanding the academic rigor of the course. According to Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1998), active learning enhances student knowledge and understanding of course content. Therefore, students who frequently encounter active learning in their courses perceive themselves gaining knowledge and understanding from their course work.

The second theory aligning with this study is, Bandura's cognitive theory of self-efficacy. First-year students are looking to peer mentors as a resource that helps provide support for course related material thus providing them with essential assistance that boosts the student's view of self-efficacy. Therefore, first-year students will find success. In this way, peer mentors are providing more practical resources to teach students to utilize good academic practices which may prove to be beneficial in both motivating and increasing self-efficacy to increase learning performance (Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005).

At the university where the current study was conducted, peer mentors are asked to develop study skill techniques, time management strategies and how to deal with stress presentations to offer to the students in the first-year seminar course. These active learning activities not only involves the students in the class but empowers them to participate in their own educational achievement. Peer mentors also encourage students to take the learning outside the classroom by participating in campus community events and reflecting on those experiences. Yet, another way this program is approaching the first-year student holistically.

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