



Peer Cohort Program Playbook

College Transition Support





TxCAN
an INITIATIVE of EDUCATE TEXAS

A Summer Melt Solution



This guide was developed in partnership with United for College + Career Success and the TxCAN Effective Practices team.

About



The *Peer Cohort Program Playbook* is a resource designed to guide two-year and four-year colleges in establishing peer cohort programs. These programs aim to create strong, supportive communities that foster connection, engagement, and academic success. The playbook compiles strategies, best practices, and actionable steps that institutions can use to foster collaborative, resilient peer networks for incoming students transitioning from high school to college.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

02	OVERVIEW
03	LAUNCHING A PEER COHORT PROGRAM
09	RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES AND GUIDE
14	PROGRAM OUTREACH TOOLKIT
20	PROGRAM EVALUATION & SUCCESS
25	CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

**ACTION IN
EDUCATION.
EDUCATION
IN ACTION.**

Encouraging Innovation in College Access with Effective Advising Practices

The Texas College Access Network (TxCAN), an initiative of Educate Texas, unites state agency leaders, regional education coalitions, college access nonprofits, and funders to collaboratively reduce barriers to college access. To promote the implementation of innovative and effective practices, TxCAN established the Effective Practices Project Team. In 2023, the team launched its inaugural Pitch Competition in partnership with the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), during their National Conference. The competition awarded a \$5,000 stipend to the winning team to advance their impactful work in college access.



Dr. Emily Calderon Galdeano, TxCAN Guiding Team Chair; Shareea Woods, TxCAN Director; Gary Tashima, Pitch Competition Winner; Natalie Williams, Effective Practices Project Team Chair.

EMERGE, the winner of TxCAN's 2023 Pitch Competition, is dedicated to empowering high-performing students from underserved communities to attend and graduate from selective colleges and universities nationwide. Their winning pitch highlighted the SQUADS program, a standout initiative addressing summer melt, boosting student persistence, and tackling capacity challenges in the transition to higher education. The program connects students from five Houston-area school districts with upper-level students at their chosen colleges, fostering mentorship, guidance, and a sense of community during the crucial transition from high school to college.

The SQUADS program has achieved remarkable results, with an 87% of program completers student persistence rate—well above the national average of 76%. This innovative model leverages peer-to-peer support through trained SQUAD coordinators, who mentor first-year students and organize social programming to build community. By addressing logistical challenges, providing guidance, and cultivating a culture of mentorship, SQUADS not only enhances student success but also expands EMERGE's capacity to deliver personalized support. TxCAN is thrilled to highlight the SQUADS program as a scalable, impactful model to improving college matriculation and retention, paving the way for transformative change in higher education access.

The College Transition Peer Cohort Playbook draws inspiration from the EMERGE SQUADS program and synthesizes promising practices from other successful peer mentoring initiatives. Programs interviewed include College Possible's Catalyze near-peer coaching program, Young Women's Preparatory Network (YWPN) Scholars Program, The Posse Foundation, and Lee College's First-Year Experience (FYE) peer mentoring program. Additionally, this playbook is informed by related research to provide a comprehensive guide for developing effective peer cohort programs.



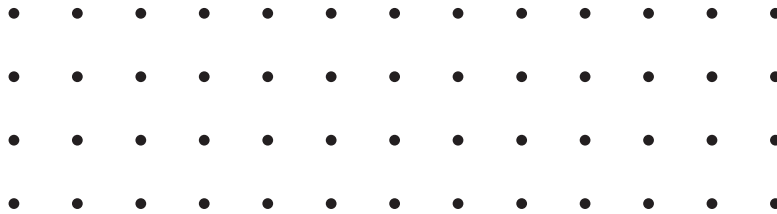
LAUNCHING A PEER COHORT PROGRAM

*Bridging the Support Gap for
Underserved Students*



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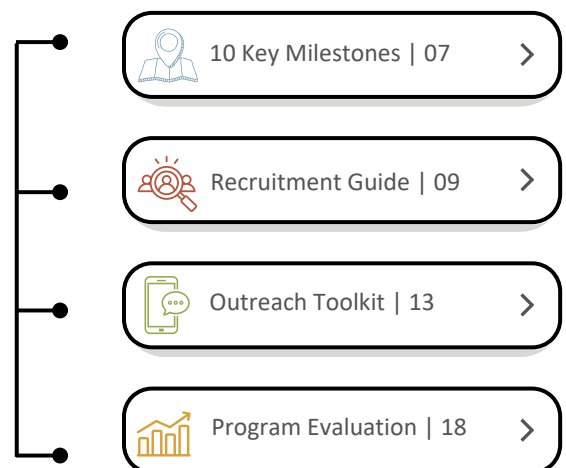
PLAYBOOK

The playbook is designed to guide the creation and implementation of peer cohort programs (a group of students who support each other academically and socially) lead by a “peer leader” who facilitates and nurtures this supportive environment. By providing a clear, step-by-step framework, it simplifies the process of starting and maintaining these programs, fostering a sense of community and collaboration among students.

WHAT’S INSIDE

- **Program Launch Milestones:** An overview of 10 key milestones for launching a successful peer coaching program.
- **Timeline:** A high-level program timeline that provides an ideal flow of a college transition support peer cohort program.
- **Recruitment Strategies:** Effective approaches for identifying and attracting a diverse, committed cohort of student participants.
- **Outreach Toolkit:** Designed to provide ready-to-use, customizable resources to effectively promote and engage students in the Peer Cohort Program.
- **Program Evaluation:** Tips and methods to assess the program’s impact, ability to drive continuous improvement for student success, and demonstrate value through data-driven outcomes.
- **Hyperlinks:** The beginning of each section includes icons that are clickable. For print versions, page numbers are listed.

Hyperlinks



10 KEY MILESTONES FOR LAUNCHING A SUCCESSFUL PEER COACHING PROGRAM

01.

Define Objectives and Goals

What are the key goals for a successful college transition program? Examples may include improving academic performance, fostering community, or providing mentorship. Program goals should align with existing institutional goals.



02.



Secure Institutional Support

Gain approval and support from college administration. Secure partnerships with high schools or community organizations that work with high school seniors. Involve legal or appropriate departments if minors are participating in the program. Present your objectives, benefits, and a foundational plan to key stakeholders.

03.



Form a Planning Committee

Identify the primary staff member responsible and assemble a cross section of faculty, staff, and students to help design and implement the program.

Develop a Recruitment Strategy

Create a plan to recruit both cohort leaders and students. Use flyers, social media, email campaigns, and information sessions to spread the word.



04.

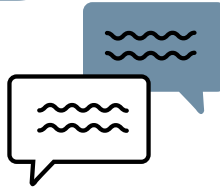
05.



Set Selection Criteria

Establish clear criteria for selecting peer leaders. Consider qualities like leadership skills, academic performance, and interpersonal abilities.

06.



Design Training Programs

Develop comprehensive training for peer leaders. Include topics like communication skills, conflict resolution, and program expectations.

Match Cohorts

Pair or group selected program participants with peer leaders based on interests, academic goals, availability, and student's intended major. Aim for balanced and supportive cohorts.

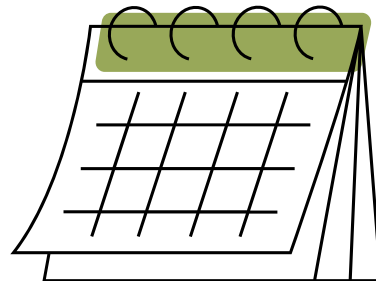


07.

08.

Plan Meetings & Activities

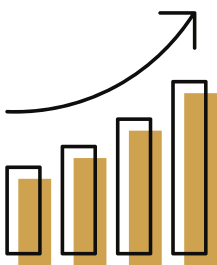
Have peer leaders schedule regular meetings for cohorts to interact. Plan activities that promote bonding, academic support, and personal development. Include staff with both formal and informal events (e.g. coffee study sessions, pizza nights, career fairs, or networking events).



09.

Monitor and Evaluate

Implement a system to track the progress and effectiveness of the program. Use surveys, feedback sessions, and performance metrics to gather data and make improvements.



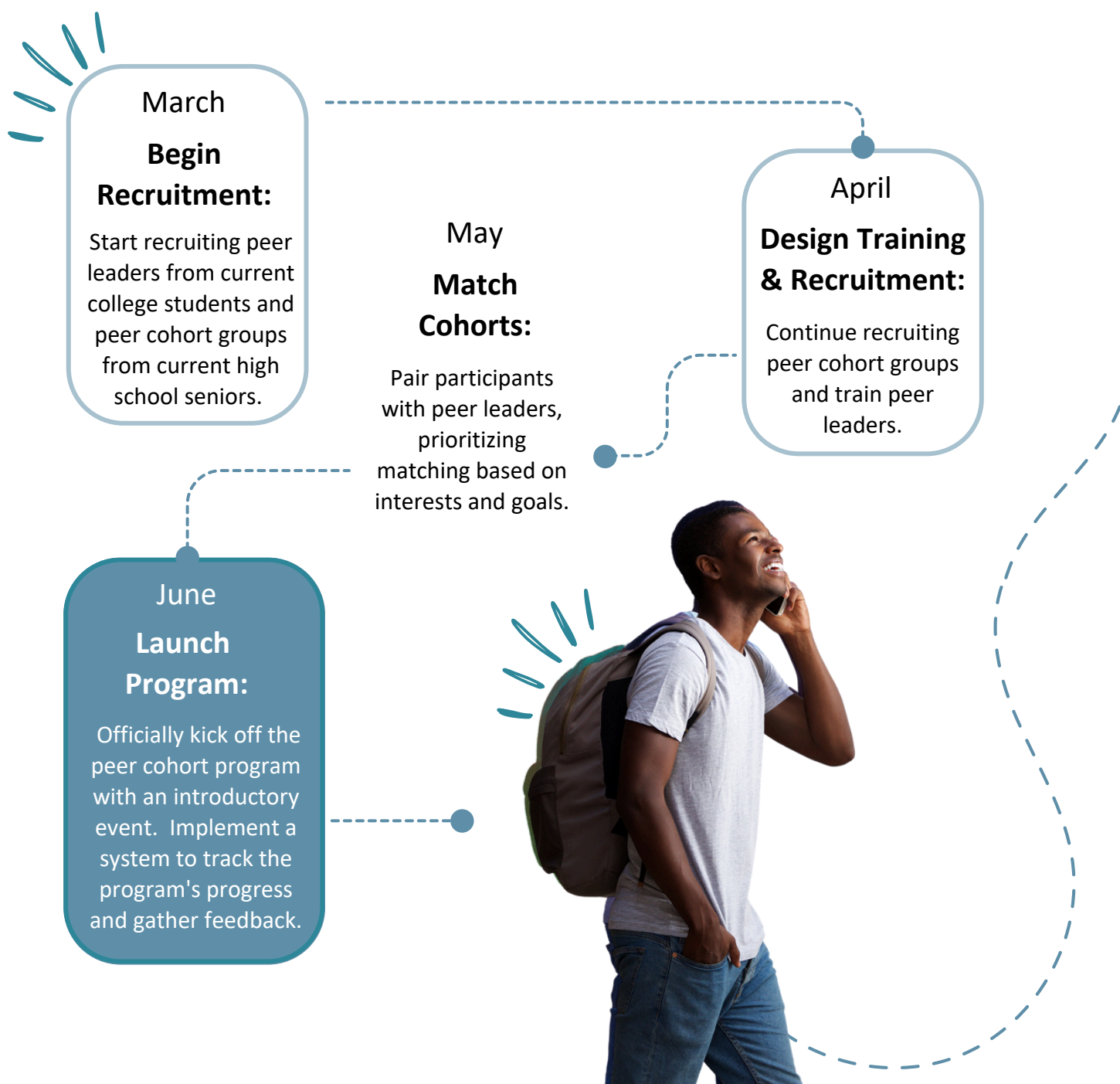
Celebrate Successes

Acknowledge the efforts and achievements of participants and peer leaders. Host events or ceremonies to celebrate milestones and provide certificates or awards.



10.

Ideal Transition Support Peer Cohort Timeline





DID YOU KNOW?



Students who participate in peer mentoring programs are more likely to achieve higher grades and report greater satisfaction with their college experience? It's a win-win for everyone involved! (Burton et al., 2021)

July Guide Program:

Remind peer leaders to schedule meetups and sessions with their own cohorts.

October Mid-Semester Check-in:

Conduct a formal check-in with cohorts to assess progress and address any issues.

Aug / Sep Plan Activities:

Ensure that meetups are being held. Make any necessary adjustments to meetings and activities based on initial feedback.

November End-of- Semester Events:

Plan events to celebrate the program's successes and recognize participants.

December Celebrate & Plan for Next Semester:

Host a closing ceremony, collect feedback, and plan for the continuation of the program depending on planned program duration.



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RECRUITMENT GUIDE

*Strategies for Assembling the Right Mix of
Student Leaders and First Year Students*

HERE YOU'LL FIND:



Recruitment Guide | 10



Cohort Selection | 11



Cohort Leader Training | 12



Advertisement | 13



3 Key Steps for Effective Cohort Recruitment



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The most important and sometimes challenging part of starting a mentoring program is actually recruiting students. Here are three key steps to recruit students for your program.

1 IDENTIFY TARGET GROUPS

- **Underserved Groups:** Focus on students who may not have equal access to resources and opportunities.
- **First-Generation Students:** Identify students who are the first in their families to attend college, as they often face unique challenges.
- **Students Needing Extra Support:** Reach out to students who may require additional academic, social or financial support to thrive in their educational environment.

2 CONDUCT OUTREACH

- **Email List:** Compile a comprehensive list of potential partnerships through school databases, student organizations, and academic advisors.
- **Platforms:** Utilize popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn to spread awareness about the peer mentoring program.
- **Content:** Craft a compelling email with a clear call-to-action, inviting students to sign up for the peer mentoring program. Highlight the program's benefits, application process, and deadlines.

3 COLLABORATION WITH HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS & ADVISORS

- **Personal Recommendations:** Work closely with student advisors to identify and recommend students who would benefit from the program based on their academic backgrounds and personal needs.
- **Workshops and Info Sessions:** Organize workshops and information sessions where advisors can present the program to students and answer any questions they may have.
- **One-on-One Meetings:** Encourage advisors to hold one-on-one meetings with students to discuss the program in detail and assist with the application process.



Cohort Leader Recruitment

- ✓ Select cohort leaders from upper classmen or transfer-ready community college students who have successfully navigated the first-year experience.
- ✓ Recruit **1 cohort leader per 8-20 students** to manage resources effectively, targeting larger cohorts for peer support.
- ✓ For cohort leaders, emphasize the career advancement, academic support, and leadership development that students will gain by joining the program, specifically designed for college students who may be juggling work, family, and education.
- ✓ To encourage participation and commitment, offer performance-based stipends, leadership awards, access to professional networking, internship opportunities or academic credit for cohort leaders.



LAUNCH AN INTERACTIVE SUPPORT HUB:

Provide a central hub for cohort leaders to access essential information. Set up an online resource hub (e.g., Dropbox, Google Drive) where they can find everything from mental health resources to campus maps. Ensure it's interactive and mobile-friendly, incorporating chat features or a FAQ section.



Training Peer Cohort Student Leaders

Comprehensive training will help cohort leaders feel confident and ready to support transitioning students. **These leaders play a crucial role in maintaining communication, sharing important information, encouraging participation in workshops, and providing cohort leadership.** By focusing on the following five key areas, we can equip them with the skills and tools they need to succeed:

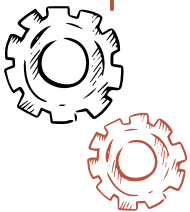
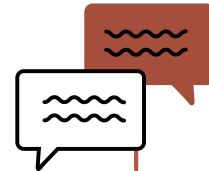


Roles and Responsibilities

- Clearly define leaders' roles and ensure they have access to resources to guide students on issues beyond their scope of work. See sample on next page.

Effective Communication

- Train leaders to communicate effectively through group chats and social media, emphasizing active listening and clear messaging.

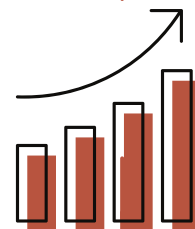


Digital Tools

- Introduce and provide hands-on training for digital tools that facilitate group communications and track engagement such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, and Discord.

Encouraging Participation

- Teach leaders how to create engaging content, ask open-ended questions, and recognize student achievements to foster active participation.



Peer Mentorship

- Provide training on building trust, offering support, and giving constructive feedback to help mentors be more effective.





WE ARE HIRING!

Apply by [Date]

ROLE OVERVIEW

The **Peer Cohort Student Leader** is an upperclassman responsible for supporting first-year students as they transition into college life. This role involves providing guidance, fostering a sense of community, and connecting students with resources to ensure a smooth and successful first year.

KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

- **Create and Monitor Group Chat:** Facilitate communication, provide support, and share helpful tips.
- **Promote Events and Activities:** Inform and encourage participation in beneficial events and workshops.
- **Provide Support and Guidance:** Offer advice on academic, social, and personal matters.
- **Connect Students with Resources:** Direct students to campus resources for issues beyond the peer leader's scope.

EXPECTATIONS

- Maintain confidentiality and respect students' privacy.
- Demonstrate empathy, patience, and a positive attitude.
- Be proactive in identifying and addressing the needs of the cohort.
- Regularly communicate with the cohort and provide consistent support.



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✉ [\[email@example.com\]](mailto:[email@example.com])



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PROGRAM OUTREACH TOOLKIT

*Ready-to-Use Resources for Effective
Student Engagement*

HERE YOU'LL FIND:



About Toolkit | 15



Program Flyer | 16



Posts (Social Media) | 17



Registration Form | 18



Program Brochure | 19



Toolkit & Communication Tips



Welcome to the Ready-to-Use Resources for Effective Student Engagement! This section provides a variety of templates designed to help you engage with students effectively. You can easily customize these templates using Canva to suit your specific needs and preferences. Additionally, you have full permission to use and modify the images included in these templates. Feel free to get creative and make these resources your own!

5 Tips to Engage & Connect

- 1** **Craft Catchy Subject Lines:** Grab their attention right from the inbox with intriguing and relevant subject lines. Use questions, humor, or a sense of urgency to make them want to open your message.
- 2** **Include Clickable Links:** Make it easy for students to access important information by embedding clickable links in your messages. Use clear call-to-action phrases like “Learn More,” “Sign Up Here,” or “Join the Event” to guide them directly to the content they need.
- 3** **Use Emojis:** Emojis can make your communication more relatable and engaging. They add a personal touch and can help convey emotions or highlight key points.
- 4** **Keep It Visual:** Incorporate images, GIFs, and videos to make your messages more dynamic and appealing. Visual content can break up text and make your communication more memorable.
- 5** **Personalize Your Messages:** Address students by their names and tailor your content to their interests and needs. Personalized messages show that you care and are paying attention to their individual journeys.



[Logo]

[PEER COHORT PROGRAM]

Connect, Collaborate, Succeed

Benefits:

- Networking
- Support
- Personal Growth
- Fun Activities

Apply by [Date]

For more information,
contact us at
[email@example.com]

JOIN TODAY!



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FLYER

16



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STUDENT INTEREST REGISTRATION FORM



Peer Cohort Program | Registration Form

Welcome! If you're interested in joining our Peer Cohort Program, please fill out this form. Our program offers a supportive community where you can connect with peers, develop essential skills, and participate in fun and engaging activities. We look forward to having you join us!

First Name

Your answer

Last Name

Your answer

Email

Your answer

Phone Number

Your answer

High School Name & City

Your answer

[Click here to view](#)



REGISTRATION

[Logo]



2025-2026
PEER COHORT
PROGRAM

Join the Peer Cohort Program!

Connect.
Collaborate.
Succeed.





Join Now!

Be Part of Something Bigger

More Information:

- +123-456-7890
- [website here]
- [email@example.com]
- 123 Anywhere St., Any City

[Click here to edit](#)



About

The Peer Cohort Program is designed to help students build meaningful connections, enhance their learning experience, and develop essential skills through collaborative activities and mentorship.



How to Apply:

Visit Our Website:

Access detailed information about the program and application requirements at [website here].

- Submit Your Registration Form
- Attend an orientation session
- Get matched!
- Start participating in cohort activities

Benefits:

The program creates a supportive community where students can connect, collaborate, and succeed.

- Personal Growth
- Networking
- Support
- Fun Activities

START YOUR APPLICATION TODAY AND JOIN OUR COMMUNITY OF MOTIVATED AND SUPPORTIVE PEERS!

Visit Us:

- 123 Anywhere St., Any City
- +123-456-7890
- [website here]
- [email@example.com]



 BROCHURE

19

PROGRAM EVALUATION & SUCCESS

*Measuring Impact and Driving Continuous
Improvement for Student Success*

HERE YOU'LL FIND:



Data & Evaluation | 21



Data Timeline | 22



Survey & Tools | 23



Sample Survey | 24



Data & Program Evaluation



A critical component of program sustainability and improvement is data capture. This section provides data tracking methods, outlining key performance indicators (KPIs), as well as data collection tools. We recommend you measure student engagement, emotional well-being, and program impact throughout the transition to college.

Timeline for Data Collection

- 1 Pre-Program:** Collect baseline demographic, academic, and emotional well-being data for students and cohort leaders. It'll create the benchmark for measuring changes over time and provide insight on who is benefiting most from the program.
- 2 Summer Transition & Successful Enrollment:** Track attendance at onboarding events and meetings, as well as student feedback on satisfaction with the support received. Track student enrollment data.
Quick Monthly Pulse Checks: Send out brief text-based surveys to gauge students' connection to peers, and whether they are accessing support when needed. Keep surveys short and offer fun graphic links (GIF's, interactive icons, celebratory effects (confetti, sound effects)) as rewards for completing them. You can use AI-driven texting platforms to automate responses based on feedback.
- 3**
- 4 During the Program:** Keep participation records and track engagement to identify at-risk students early. Consider using the Mentors' Perceived Program Support Scale (MPPSS) to identify cohort leaders who may need additional support.
- 5 End-of-Program Evaluation:** Review student outcomes - successful enrollment, retention, and program engagement.

Timeline for Data Tracking and Survey Distribution

4.1. Pre-Program (Spring of Senior Year)

March - April:

- Student Pre-Program Data Collection: Capture demographic and academic data.
- Program Manager Data Collection: Gather demographic and experience-related information for program managers.

May:

- Baseline Emotional Well-being Survey: Administer pre-program Social Emotional Learning survey to students (see SEL survey sample on next page).

4.2. Summer Transition (June - August)

June:

- Summer Participation Tracking: Begin tracking student attendance at summer onboarding meetings and events.
- Pulse Check Survey (Monthly/Bi-weekly): Distribute short engagement surveys to monitor student excitement, preparedness and readiness for college.

July:

- Emotional Well-being Survey: Conduct a quick emotional well-being check.
- Pulse Check Survey (Monthly/Bi-weekly)

August:

- Pulse Check Survey (Transition Survey): Send out a survey to assess how prepared students feel for the fall semester (e.g., financial, academic, and emotional preparedness).

4.3. Fall & Spring Semester (Sept - May)

DATA	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	APR	MAY
WEEKLY PARTICIPATION TRACKING	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
PULSE CHECK SURVEY	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING SURVEY		✓				✓		✓
SATISFACTION RATING				✓				✓

4.4. Post-Program (Summer After Freshman Year)

June:

- Student Satisfaction Rating: Administer a survey to assess satisfaction with the peer/program support received and program structure.
- Peer-Coordinator Satisfaction Rating: Collect feedback from program facilitators on the progress and effectiveness of program.
- Program Impact Evaluation: Analyze all collected data and compile a report on the program’s overall effectiveness.

Student Wellbeing Sample Survey

Assessing Your College Experience



The PERMA-Profiler is a comprehensive tool that assesses five key elements of wellbeing: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. By using this framework, we aim to gain a holistic understanding of students' overall wellbeing and identify areas for improvement.

Good to Know: A healthy baseline would generally show scores in the upper range (6.5 and above) for positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, while scores for negative emotion would be in the lower range (5 and below).

QUESTIONS		RATING	
		Never (0)	Always (11)
1	In general, how often do you feel joyful?	<input type="range"/>	
2	How often do you become absorbed in what you are doing?	<input type="range"/>	
3	To what extent do you feel loved and supported by others?	<input type="range"/>	
4	In general, to what extent do you feel that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile?	<input type="range"/>	
5	How often do you achieve the important goals you have set for yourself?	<input type="range"/>	

Tools to Consider: Store demographic and academic data in Excel, a database, or a CRM. For surveys, monitor students' progress in acquiring social and emotional competence using tools like DESSA (Devereux Student Strengths Assessment) and PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment).



Pulse Check Survey Sample

Monthly Student Check-In

The Monthly Pulse Check Survey is a brief, recurring survey designed to gather feedback from first-year students participating in the peer cohort program. This survey aims to assess students' overall college experience, the support they receive from their peer leader, and the effectiveness of program activities. Feel free to adjust the questions to better fit your needs.

1. How are you feeling about your overall college experience this month?



Very Satisfied



Satisfied



Neutral



Unsatisfied



Very Unsatisfied

2. How supported do you feel by your peer leader?



Very Satisfied



Satisfied



Neutral



Unsatisfied



Very Unsatisfied

3. How helpful have the group chat and in-person check-ins been for you?



Extremely
Helpful



Somewhat
Helpful



Neutral



Somewhat
Unhelpful



Extremely
Unhelpful

4. Have you participated in any events or workshops promoted by your peer leader?



Yes



No

5. If yes, how beneficial did you find these events or workshops?



Very Beneficial



Beneficial



Neutral



Not Very
Beneficial



Not Beneficial
At All

6. What challenges are you currently facing that you would like more support with?

7. Do you have any suggestions for improving the peer cohort program?

Note from Editor

While there are no silver bullets in our efforts to increase the number of students successfully transitioning to college, we know that many—especially first-generation college students—need personalized support and encouragement along the way. A successful transition requires completing financial aid and enrollment processes, but sometimes, it's the smaller challenges—like figuring out the right bus route, accessing campus resources like a food pantry, or knowing who to ask for help—that can be just as discouraging.

We believe that a well-structured peer mentor program can extend the capacity of campus staff and help new students feel truly connected, leading to increased persistence and success.

We are incredibly grateful to our project team volunteers for their dedication and hard work in planning our first pitch competition and creating this playbook. A special thank you to the United for College Success team for making this playbook a reality.

We hope this playbook inspires you to launch or strengthen a peer mentoring program. If you do, please reach out—we'd love to hear about your work!



Acknowledgments

This playbook was developed in partnership with United for College + Career Success and the TxCAN Effective Practices team. Special thanks to Gary Tashima, Managing Director of Alumni and College Success at Emerge Fellowship, for his contributions and for winning the TxCAN Inaugural Pitch Competition with the innovative SQUADS program.

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