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Southern Adventist University Builds Nearpeer Into Strategic Plan; Achieves Record Enrollment

RECORD ENROLLMENT

Southern Adventist University partnered with Nearpeer to grow enrollment. Southern's initial goal for Nearpeer was to strengthen early student connection in the months leading up to the start of classes. The program was highly successful, reducing melt to 0% for incoming male, first-generation, Hispanic, and Black students who used Nearpeer. This was in contrast to 15%+ melt for students who did not use Nearpeer. This contributed to Southern achieving an all-time enrollment record and establishing Nearpeer as a pillar of its latest 5-year strategic plan. Southern is now using Nearpeer to improve yield rates among their 2026 admitted student population.

KEY FINDINGS

Southern Adventist selected Nearpeer to build early connection among deposited students and keep them committed. Southern achieved record enrollment in 2025 and expanded their partnership with Nearpeer in 2026 to serve admitted students and continue record gains.

 **100%**
Matriculation

Full matriculation in these populations for committed, incoming recruits who used Nearpeer to build community:

 **0%**
Summer melt

- **First-generation**
- **Male**
- **Black**
- **Hispanic, and**
- **Pacific Islander**



Strategic Pillar

Nearpeer is added to the university's strategic recruitment & retention plan

WHY SOUTHERN CHOSE TO PARTNER WITH NEARPEER



FROM INITIAL INTEREST TO INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT

After attending a webinar hosted by Nearpeer on emerging trends in college admissions, Jason Merryman, the Vice President of Enrollment Management at Southern Adventist University, was intrigued by the platform's potential. Since becoming the head of the university's division of enrollment management at the start of the decade, VP Merryman has consistently grown Southern Adventist's enrollment every year. To keep that streak alive, Merryman is constantly looking for innovative new tools that can deliver on multiple fronts – not just improving admissions yield and reducing summer melt, but also driving higher year-over-year retention, increasing the university's belonging scores, and generating a considerable return on the university's investment. Nearpeer seemed like it could deliver on all fronts.

Jason Merryman

Vice President for Enrollment Management



Hearing nearly a dozen success stories from happy Nearpeer clients during this webinar (with the private, faith-based universities' testimonials being the most resonant for him), VP Merryman decided that Nearpeer could help Southern Adventist continue to increase enrollment for years to come. Bringing the idea to Dr. Ken Shaw, President of Southern Adventist University, and Dr. Kathy Purnell, the university's Special Advisor on Belonging & Strategic Planning, Southern Adventist's leadership decided that they would partner with Nearpeer to see if the platform could help with their strategic growth plans – and the collaboration more than lived up to expectations.



SOUTHERN'S ABILITY TO REACH STUDENTS BEFORE THEY ARRIVED

Being alumni of Southern Adventist themselves, VP Merryman and President Shaw immediately saw Nearpeer's value in its ability to extend Southern's warm and welcoming community to pre-enrolled students to help them feel a sense of belonging and a stronger sense of commitment to the university months before the start of classes. Realizing that one

NEARPEER BECOMES FOUNDATIONAL IN THE UNIVERSITY'S STRATEGIC PLAN

of Southern's many draws for prospective recruits is its beautiful campus in Collegedale, Tennessee (boasting over 1,300 acres in the Appalachian foothills), the university leverages on-campus tours, preview events, virtual tours, and even 24/7 live webcams of the campus as a way to help prospective students get a sense of campus life and imagine themselves thriving there. As Ryan Harrell, Analytics Manager at Southern Adventist, explains, "The data shows that if we can get students here on campus, the chances of them enrolling are dramatically higher. So, one of our major pushes in enrollment is to get people here to experience Southern because if you experience Southern, you know why Southern is different."



However, getting to campus may be a challenge for many prospective Southern students – 77% of them are from out of state – so the university needed a tool to “meet students where they are” while introducing them to the other element of Southern that makes the university so special: the people. To President Shaw and team, Nearpeer could serve as a way for Southern to help incoming students make dozens of meaningful connections with other prospective students and campus ambassadors without needing to set foot on campus.

The team felt that this digital extension of campus life and community to pre-enrolled recruits could be transformative for enrollment. That's why Southern went “all in” on Nearpeer, making the app **an immediate pillar of the university's latest 5-year strategic plan**, not only to drive higher enrollment in the current cycle, but to achieve 4,000 enrollments before the end of the decade. According to the university's latest strategic plan, Southern will:

"leverage the Nearpeer online app to foster peer-to-peer connections among incoming students, enhancing their sense of belonging and increasing enrollment yield rates as well as first-year retention."

*– Southern Adventist University
2025 - 2030 Strategic Plan*

And, after only one year, the university's investment in Nearpeer is already yielding remarkable dividends. In fact, Southern Adventist University achieved an all-time enrollment record in its first year working with Nearpeer, realizing great gains amongst recruits from priority populations due to higher matriculation rates.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES ACROSS MULTIPLE DEMOGRAPHICS & PRIORITY POPULATIONS



Among the populations that benefited the most from having access to Nearpeer were incoming male recruits and incoming first-generation students. Knowing that male enrollment is on decline nationwide and that unaffiliated males (males not entering as part of a sports program or planning to join a student organization or club), this was a priority population for Southern Adventist University – and the **male recruits who used Nearpeer had a 100% matriculation rate**. No incoming male student who used Nearpeer melted, whereas incoming male recruits who didn't use Nearpeer had a 10.2% melt rate. The same impact was true for incoming first-generation students – students who are often at risk for non-matriculation due to feelings of impostor syndrome, anxiety, and uncertainty. However, **all first-generation students who used Nearpeer over the summer matriculated** for the fall semester: first-generation students who didn't use Nearpeer, though, had a 13% melt rate.

And, perhaps most importantly as Tennessee's only Hispanic Serving Institution, the same trend was seen with incoming Hispanic students: **no Hispanic students who used Nearpeer melted**, and every one of them had a smooth and successful transition into school. Further, to the delight of university leadership, **the same was true for incoming Black Students and Pacific Islander students**. Without Nearpeer, these three populations had a combined 14.5% melt rate.



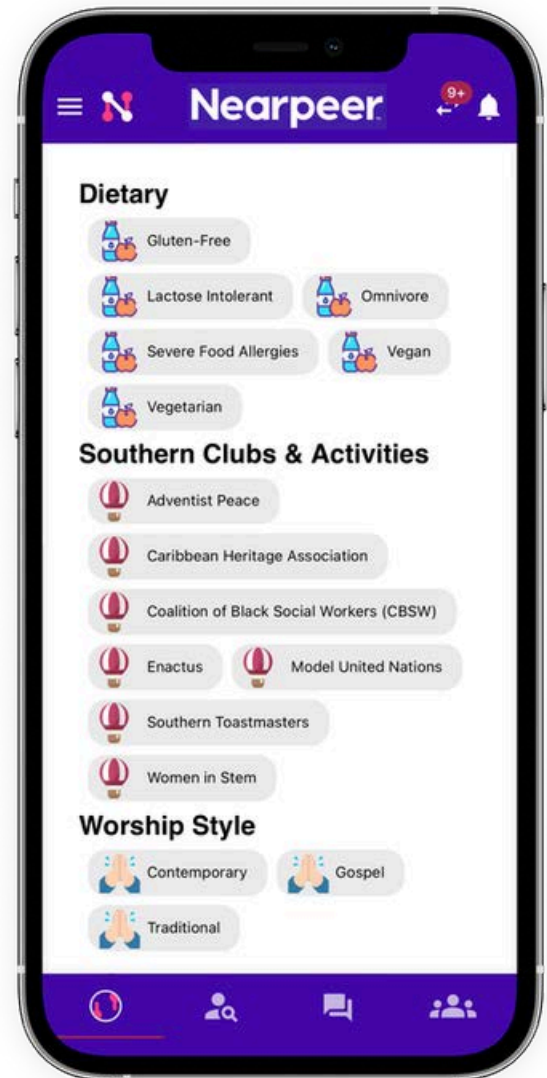
These results made clear that Nearpeer was filling a major gap for students from priority populations and bolstering strategic enrollment growth at Southern Adventist University. Helping each student find friends in the months leading up to the start of classes gives their recruits

CUSTOM BUILT TO MEET CAMPUS CULTURE

more confidence in their choice of Southern and makes them more excited and less anxious about starting college. Staff and students also expressed appreciation for Nearpeer's ability to custom-tailor the platform to ensure that Southern's unique Nearpeer community reflected its Seventh-Day Adventist identity.

HOW NEARPEER WAS CUSTOMIZED FOR SOUTHERN

With healthy living being an important theme for Seventh-Day Adventists, it was important for Southern to allow students to connect early over dietary lifestyles, gluten-free diets, lactose intolerance, and even food allergies. On top of Nearpeer's existing list of 3,600 interests / topics for students to connect on and discuss, Southern also wanted to make sure that worship styles were included: gospel, contemporary, and traditional. Southern Adventist's clubs, activities, and organizations were also added to the platform as a way for students to signal their early interest in getting involved in these groups – and, knowing that many of their incoming students are also passionate about video games, Southern even expanded on Nearpeer's extensive list of existing video game topics, adding in real-time strategy games, sandbox games, survival games, and massively multiplayer online roleplaying games.



With results and customizations like these, Southern Adventist University has already decided to introduce Nearpeer even earlier into the enrollment cycle for the year ahead. Together, Nearpeer and Southern Adventist University are eager to continue to help more aspiring college students have the confidence to start school and set them up for greater long-term success.

THE Nearpeer[®] EXPERIENCE



LAUNCH QUICKLY

Nearpeer is a turnkey solution that can be implemented with minimal lift from university partners. With no system integration or university staffing required, the platform has launched in as little as 24 hours for clients seeking immediate help growing enrollment, improving retention, and supporting greater sense of belonging among students.

SEE SIGNIFICANT RESULTS

Institutions using Nearpeer can achieve 3X higher yield rates, up to 93% melt reduction, 17% year-over-year retention increases, and 16% higher four-year graduation rates. Students also report reduced anxiety and isolation, along with greater inclusion and belonging, making Nearpeer the top choice for improving student success and mental health.

TRUSTED PARTNER AND REAL IMPACT

Nearpeer partners with institutions of all sizes to support diverse learners, from undergraduates to adults and early-college students. Nearpeer conducted the largest clinical trial on belonging's impact on student success in higher education, establishing itself as a leader the field. This transformational work is backed by philanthropic leaders like The Lumina Foundation and The Lilly Endowment.

ENHANCE EXISTING INVESTMENTS

Nearpeer is a powerful standalone tool that seamlessly enhances universities' existing systems, including student information systems, res-life platforms, marketing tools, student success platforms, and resources for tutoring, mentorship, and mental health.

CONSIDERABLE ROI

Nearpeer is a proven, high-ROI investment for universities, driving increased yield, reduced melt, and improved persistence. Partner schools see a 10x (or higher) return through higher enrollment that increases tuition revenue, with some achieving up to 97x ROI. No wonder *Forbes* calls Nearpeer "A very big deal."

HIGH ADOPTION

"Will I fit in?" is today's top concern for college students, and without an early sense of belonging, enrollment and persistence decline sharply. Nearpeer addresses this need by helping students form meaningful friendships before orientation, leading to an average 50% voluntary adoption—rising to 95% at some schools.

Forbes

Forbes on Nearpeer

“For those in the know, or who follow the razor’s edge world of college recruitment, boosting enrollment is gold. But also boosting retention, as was shown in this study [of Nearpeer], is platinum...

This is a very big deal.”

ABOUT NEARPEER

Nearpeer is a peer-to-peer engagement platform that strengthens students' sense of belonging from their first touchpoint, pre-enrollment through graduation. By using advanced matching algorithms, Nearpeer creates personalized, healthy 1:1 connections that help every student feel seen, supported, and part of a community. Institutions partner with Nearpeer to offer a custom-built, safe, and inclusive virtual community space proven to increase confidence, commitment, and connection across the student lifecycle. This approach consistently drives measurable gains in enrollment, persistence, resilience, and graduation rates — while also reducing loneliness, anxiety, and isolation among students. It's why so many colleges and universities trust Nearpeer to power belonging at scale—and why Forbes called Nearpeer “a very big deal.”



 **Nearpeer**®



For more information, visit nearpeer.com.