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Virginia Commonwealth University Improves Academic Success & Retention with Nearpeer

LONG-TERM GAINS

When Virginia Commonwealth University achieved a 13-year high in fall-to-spring retention during its first year of partnership with Nearpeer, the Office of Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success took notice.

Launched as a one-year trial to test whether the Nearpeer app could improve retention, the platform's immediate ability to drive academic gains inspired VCU leadership to expand the short-term pilot into a multi-year partnership between Virginia Commonwealth and Nearpeer that was funded by The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. The results they have achieved have been remarkable.

KEY FINDINGS

With Nearpeer, new VCU students are more likely to do well academically, less likely to receive an academic warning, and more likely to get help if they do struggle.



71%

of incoming VCU Rams said "finding my social fit" was a top concern



Higher GPAs

and midterm grades for new students using Nearpeer



+2pp
Percentage-Points

increase in fall-to-fall retention for first-year students on Nearpeer

NEARPEER'S EASE OF USE MADE AN IMMEDIATE INTERVENTION POSSIBLE



VCU

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

TESTING THE THEORY THAT BELONGING IMPROVES RETENTION

After VCU's College of Health Professions utilized Nearpeer to improve student belonging, Dr. Maggie Tolan, the Executive Senior Associate Vice President for Student Success and Innovation at VCU, decided to expand Nearpeer beyond a single school and pilot it with all of VCU's incoming Rams university wide.

In less than a year, the improvement in academic performance was so striking that the pilot quickly evolved into a much more involved and deeper partnership between VCU and Nearpeer with research at its core.

Speaking of the initial pilot, Jonathan Fuller, Director of First and Second Year Experiences, acknowledged that their Nearpeer rollout happened later in the cycle than they had initially imagined. Ideally, VCU wanted to introduce Nearpeer early in the summer to support incoming Rams as they transitioned into college, but procurement delays led to VCU inviting their first-year students to Nearpeer the week before classes started and as students were already arriving on campus.

Regardless, both VCU and Nearpeer felt confident that the tool would still be very helpful boosting first-year persistence and belonging – and they were right.

As Fuller explained, it was “the ease of lift” that made the Nearpeer rollout possible during the busy start of the school year.

Jonathan Fuller

Director of First and Second Year Experiences



“The ease of the lift: that’s a huge part of the story of Nearpeer at VCU. Getting started and getting on-boarded was an easy process, even facing the time-crunch at the start of the semester.”

Though it was too late in the cycle to see any yield impact for incoming recruits, the primary goal of the Nearpeer pilot was to see whether the platform’s ability to increase a student’s sense of belonging and connectedness would translate into greater first-year retention, and VCU did not want to miss that opportunity.

“We decided, you know what? Let’s go for it. We sent out three emails to our new students – incoming first-years and transfers – inviting them to join Nearpeer. ‘Hey, here’s this opportunity. Here’s some information about it. Watch this quick video.’ And just doing that, **we saw more than 25% adoption in the first week alone.**”

INCREASED COMMUNITY VIA NEARPEER LEADS TO MYRIAD BENEFITS

ANXIOUS FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS FLOCK TO THE NEARPEER PLATFORM

The fact that one in four new students voluntarily joined Nearpeer and created their own profile – as move-in was underway and as classes were starting – served as an indication that these new recruits were still seeking a greater sense of belonging and nervous about starting college. In fact, a survey of incoming VCU Rams revealed that the majority of new students (71%) selected “finding my social fit” as a top concern. As one new Ram expressed,

“Finding other people with similar passions was very exciting because I thought people might find me weird.”

Another went on to explain,

“When I first started connecting with people on Nearpeer, I was shocked to see how quickly I made connections. It made me feel excited to be on campus and get into college life.”

And, another shared that,

“I was adding people from my hometown, and I found this one guy, and now we talk all day and all night. He’s honestly the greatest, and if it wasn’t for me just randomly looking up people from my hometown on Nearpeer, I wouldn’t have found him. I’m so glad we had this app.”



Tolan, Fuller, and the team in Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success were pleased to see so many students using the platform to find friends, build community, and develop a sense of belonging.

By the mid-semester point, the Nearpeer platform had become more ubiquitous, and another survey was deployed, revealing that nearly half of VCU’s first-year students expressed feeling more excited about their futures at Virginia Commonwealth and that Nearpeer made them feel more reassured in their decision to enroll at VCU instead of at a different institution.

Nearpeer also proved helpful in significantly reducing student anxiety. Nearly a third of all new Rams (31%) expressed that Nearpeer lessened their stress as a first-year student. As one of them explained, **“Nearpeer has been quite helpful in at least seeing that the people around me aren’t as different from me as I first assumed, and that has been a relief.”**

STUDENTS GAIN HIGHER SELF-CONFIDENCE FROM USING NEARPEER

Another new Ram also shared that Nearpeer made her **“feel more comfortable because this app was a clear way of making friends,”** and without it, she would have felt **“lost.”** (Many students expressed a similar sense of uncertainty that was relieved by Nearpeer.)

Overwhelmingly, though, **the primary element that new Rams identified as being the greatest benefit they received from Nearpeer was increased confidence in themselves.** That was the refrain that shone through the surveys of new students.

“Nearpeer really made me feel more confident in myself,” one student expressed. “I’ve met a lot of new people on this app, and that makes me feel more confident about moving to a new place without really knowing anyone,” another student shared.

“Honestly, just getting a glimpse of what I have in common with other people makes me so much more confident,” reported another.



WE ARE THE UNCOMMON.

NEARPEER IMPACT ACROSS A SPECTRUM OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Perhaps more than any other partner that Nearpeer has worked with, Virginia Commonwealth went to great lengths to look at how students using Nearpeer performed across the broadest range of metrics – from academic performance to resiliency, from mid-term grades to end-of-year GPAs, from week-to-week persistence to the number of real-time “early alert” warning flags that first-year students received.

The positive results were beyond what anyone had anticipated. Across the board, this in-depth pilot study revealed that Nearpeer was not only helping more students feel comfortable at VCU, it also helped them perform better in the classroom, achieve greater outcomes, be more likely to succeed, and return semester over semester.

As ESAVP Tolan explains to new Rams, VCU administers surveys to all incoming students to establish a unique success plan for each of them and forecast potential obstacles that may challenge them. This enables Tolan and the Strategic Enrollment and Student Success team to be prepared to help each first-year student successfully navigate their distinct university experience.

DATA, INSIGHTS, AND A TOOL THAT ENHANCES EXISTING PLATFORMS

Dr. Maggie Tolan

Executive Sr. Associate VP for Student Success & Innovation



“Students’ answers will help us understand what each student’s personal success plan might entail, to learn what’s important to them and how we can dial them in to all we have available on campus.... Getting help meeting new friends, and getting information about clubs, social organizations, and campus activities are often at the top of the list.” These are some of the reasons that Nearpeer was implemented at VCU in the first place; however, a more holistic assessment of the intervention needed to be conducted.

VCU’s internal rubric for each first-year student includes the following categories: **academic motivation**, which is broken down into study habits, reading interests, verbal & writing skills, math & science confidence, commitment to college, and interactions with previous teachers; **general coping skills**, which is comprised social engagement, family support, capacity for tolerance, career plans, and financial security; and **receptivity to support services**, which includes openness to academic assistance, personal counseling resources, social engagement opportunities, career guidance, and financial guidance.

While welcoming new students, ESAVP Tolan explains how all of these elements factor into a new undergrad’s efforts to simply get their bearings while adjusting to university life. “How do I get my study skills in order? What is the writing center? What are some of these clubs and organizations?... What should I do? Who should I meet? Who should I talk to?”

This, she says, is why the university works hard to understand each student’s unique needs and make every student aware of all of the resources around them, particularly the services that will be most valuable to them as individuals. Dr. Tolan and her team are always asking themselves, “How do we support [new students] when navigating new content, learning new material, and seeking peer mentors to help [them] make it through?”

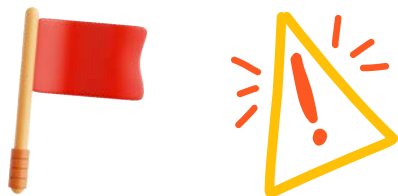
Ultimately, she explains, **“At the end of the day, our goal is to make sure that something that might be small in the beginning doesn’t become something big. What we’re trying to do is start [students] strong.”** And tools like Nearpeer that can support this mission are invaluable.



STUDENTS USING NEARPEER RECEIVE FEWER WARNING FLAGS & ALERTS

NEARPEER USERS PROVE TO BE MORE PREPARED AND RESILIENT

This “strong start” is exactly what Nearpeer was proving to help with during the one-year pilot at VCU. In his role as Director of First and Second Year Experiences, Jonathan Fuller was pleased to see that students who turned to Nearpeer for greater social support were less likely to receive an academic warning flag during their first year in college, and, if they did get flagged for whatever reason from university staff, the students were “more likely to reach out and schedule an appointment with a relevant office to get help if they had used Nearpeer.”



These findings suggest that being in Nearpeer, where students are able to connect with peers, campus ambassadors, and support resources, translated into students who were more college ready, more resilient, and more likely to know where to go if they needed help. This was tremendously encouraging.

Further, VCU learned that students who used Nearpeer during their first year in college had fewer midterm grades of “D” and “F” – and they were more likely to have a higher GPA at the end of their first semester.

And, the clearest finding: **students who used Nearpeer had close to a two percentage point higher fall-to-fall retention rate** compared to those who did not.

  **2 Percentage-Point Increase in Retention**

“During our first semester, we were trying to check in at a few key points to see how Nearpeer was performing and wanted to pay attention to some key markers throughout the first year,” Fuller explained. “We were seeing [these markers] were pretty consistent among some of the key demographic groups and priorities groups we were trying to focus on as we analyzed a lot of data across our campus, from Pell-eligible students, first-generation students, and other underrepresented groups.”

Fuller goes on to explain, “We recognized early on that the swath of our students – that sample who used Nearpeer – was pretty representative of the demographics across our first-year class... and **the benefits of Nearpeer applied not just to priority groups but to the whole student population.**”

Acknowledging the tremendous impact that Nearpeer is having at VCU, Fuller likes to remind his colleagues and other campuses considering Nearpeer of this perspective:

NEARPEER DRIVES POSITIVE RESULTS ACROSS ALL STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

"We're noticing benefits across the board for all students... and we saw all that impact just by sending out three emails [about Nearpeer]."

Not only does this once again underscore the ease of use of Nearpeer but also the tremendous return that can be yielded from a simple initiative that pays off in myriad ways.

"If lift around getting started [with Nearpeer] is something university administrators are concerned about, even with a really crunched time frame and a less-than-ideal time to launch the service, we still saw impact that we are really excited about."

Jonathan Fuller

Director of First and
Second Year Experiences



Seeing such promising and tangible impact in this initial pilot, Virginia Commonwealth University decided to enter a multi-year partnership with Nearpeer before the end of the initial pilot, leveraging a grant from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia to support Nearpeer at VCU for years to come.

The grant, which is focused on helping first-year students improve retention rates (and, in turn, see greater long-term outcomes), is intended to close persistence gaps.

As ESAVP Tolan explains, "The grant, really, for first-year students, is from day one to get them on campus... [and] stay in school longer." She goes on to say, "It's about staying in school, completing that degree, and getting access to the things that make changes in families' lives."

Students who use Nearpeer while settling into university life get the support they need to persist and thrive, becoming more likely to succeed academically, avoid first-year pitfalls, be better prepared to seek support when needed, and feel a greater overall confidence in their ability to flourish in college.

As Jonathan Fuller explains, "The data [from the analysis of Nearpeer] is not just showing us how we can be more successful as a university, it is also showing us how students are directly impacted by the opportunity to make connections that help sustain them through what can be a really difficult transition." He sums up VCU's partnership with Nearpeer in simple terms: "We're finding that social transitions can be really challenging... [so] **offering Nearpeer to eliminate that initial barrier, and helping students find someone to connect and chat with, is such a huge asset.**"

The future looks bright for the VCU and Nearpeer partnership, and Nearpeer remains dedicated to supporting VCU's mission.

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 enrollment, 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 platform 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.

ACHIEVE COMPELLING RETURNS

Nearpeer is a proven, high-ROI investment for universities, driving increased yield, reduced melt, and improved persistence. Partner colleges see \$1 spent on Nearpeer delivering well over \$10 in tuition and other enrollment-related 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.