

PUBLIC // 4-YEAR



CUNY's Hunter College Uses Nearpeer to Improve Belonging and Connection for Incoming Students

MEETING A NEED FOR TODAY'S STUDENTS

"Good things happen when students connect."

This observation from Cynthia Vance, Hunter College's Vice President for Strategic Initiatives, sparked an innovative partnership between Nearpeer and the largest campus in the City University of New York (CUNY) system. Realizing that college students who have a strong support network are more likely to start school, persist, and thrive, Hunter College leaders were drawn to Nearpeer for its proven ability to help students connect in healthy, meaningful ways.

KEY FINDINGS

Nearpeer fills an important need, helping Hunter College's incoming students to connect and feel a greater sense belonging. Results include:



11,000+

friendships made before the start of classes



1,500+

hours of community engagement in first 90 days



30%

of incoming students **adopted Nearpeer in the first 30 days**

MEETING A NEED FOR TODAY'S STUDENTS

HUNTER

The City University of New York

New York, NY

The leaders of Hunter College, part of America's largest urban public university system, were reassured by Nearpeer's extensive track record of growing enrollment and improving retention at several urban, commuter campuses. They were particularly impressed by Nearpeer's work in the California State University System, the nation's largest four-year public university, comprising 23 campuses across the state.

Hunter's Student Affairs team recognized the positive impact a healthy campus community can have on enrollment and retention. They also aimed to address a persistent challenge: student socialization. Recent opinion pieces in *The Athenian*, a student publication at Hunter College, highlighted how difficult it was for students to make friends and feel a sense of belonging. As a commuter campus, Hunter has few social spaces for students to meet casually, and student loneliness was rising.

Further, students reported how burdensome it could be finding relevant social events and general community at Hunter since the university is spread across multiple city blocks, so Nearpeer seemed like it could be a turn-key and immediate solution to this challenge.

As the leading student-engagement platform that fosters healthy belonging, inclusion, and socialization among college students, Nearpeer felt like a timely option. Hunter College leaders were intrigued by Nearpeer's ability to help students build strong social connections before setting foot on campus and throughout their first year in college. Having a singular virtual space where all students could connect, build community, and find meaningful friendships was appealing to Hunter -- but traditional social platforms weren't considered safe, effective, or good for student mental wellness.



MEETING A NEED FOR TODAY'S STUDENTS



Hunter leaders appreciated that Nearpeer had been designed in line with the U.S. Surgeon General's tech guidance for healthy online community. It was equally encouraging that Nearpeer's expertise in creating custom-built, private, invitation-only online spaces had already enabled hundreds of thousands of college students across the country to find meaningful friendships and have a successful college experience. With over 2,600 interests on the platform and industry-leading matching technology to help students make rich connections at the push of a button, Nearpeer seemed like the perfect tool to help Hunter College students "find their people."

The Hunter College Foundation, which raises funds to support Hunter College students and related support programs, considered Nearpeer a worthy investment to deliver what students wanted: a simple tool that could enable undergrads (particularly first-year students) to make organic friendships and easily find study buddies, roommates, rideshares, gym buddies, bandmates, and more.

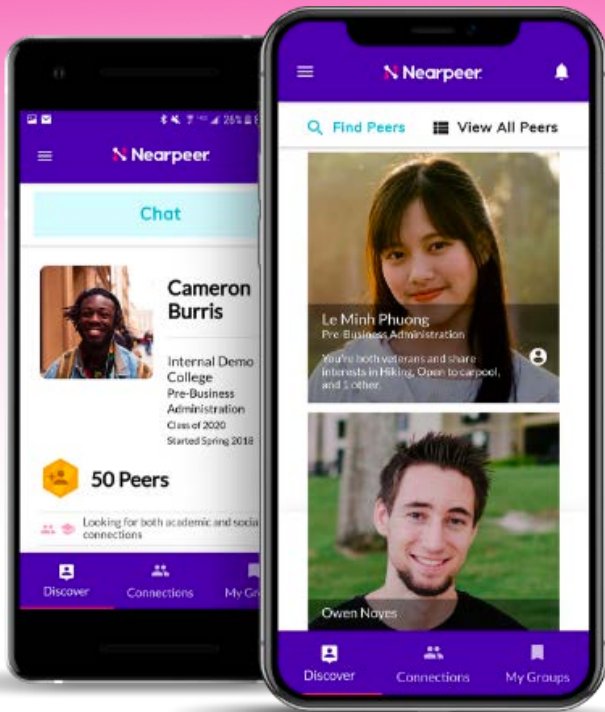
As Brian Buckwald, Assistant Dean for Student Achievement, observed, **"This could catch on like wildfire." And he was right.**



When incoming Hunter students were invited to join Nearpeer, they flocked to the platform. In fact, more than a third of the incoming class downloaded Nearpeer when it was introduced at orientation.

HOW STUDENTS ENGAGED WITH NEARPEER

Over 11,000 new friendships quickly sparked, and students were excited to discuss everything from their favorite boba tea flavors to playing *Minecraft*. A rich discussion was sparked over students' favorite animes and mangas: *The Apothecary Diaries*, *Jujutsu Kaisen*, and *Wind Breaker* were all considered for the top spots. Incoming students also used Nearpeer to share tips on how to navigate the campus, register for courses, and join clubs.



1 in 3 incoming students voluntarily adopted Nearpeer in the first 30 days

11,000+

1-to-1 connections were made among incoming students

15,000+

hours spent engaging with peers in the first 90 days

Not surprisingly, "The Commuter Student Group Chat" on Nearpeer was hopping around the clock, and the Nearpeer platform brought together lots of students of diverse backgrounds from Western Africa, China, Brazil, and The Caribbean. A number of students from Dominican families quickly built affinity, and some students from Filipino families used Nearpeer to chat in the Bisaya and Tagalog languages.



A BOLD EXPERIMENT FOR MODERN STUDENTS

Nikole Feliciano, Assistant Dean for Academic Support, had a unique way to drive high Nearpeer adoption amongst Hunter's newest recruits. At the end of her orientation session, "The Top Ten Things About Being a Hunter Hawk," Nikole saved the best thing for last: the friends you'll make. But then, in a creative twist, Nikole had the packed auditorium of new students participate in a classic "ice breaker," but one she knew would be challenging for today's post-pandemic students.

"We're going to take the next ten minutes," Nikole told the room, "for each of you to turn to the people around you, introduce yourselves, and get to know one another." Immediately, the air was taken out of the room, as is often the case when college students are asked to spark a conversation with fellow students they know nothing about.

Students squirmed in their seats, no one wanted to make eye contact with anyone



else, and the level of discomfort among the Gen Z assembly was palpable. Assistant Dean Feliciano's exercise was delivering the precise experience she intended, illustrating the awkwardness and difficulty of meeting new people in a new environment.

She finally had mercy on the room and said, "Okay, we know how awkward it can be to meet new people these days -- even when in the same room -- but don't worry. We've got you covered. We invested in this great new platform, Nearpeer, that will allow you to match, find, and search for friends from the comfort of your own phone that you can then meet in real life here on campus." The students were so relieved and grateful to have such a helpful resource that 30% of the incoming class downloaded Nearpeer after that one orientation exercise -- an impressive feat inspired by Assistant Dean Feliciano's creativity and empathy.



WHAT NEW HUNTER HAWKS ARE SAYING

One incoming nursing major who commutes ninety minutes to campus every day found this orientation exercise helpful, and she considered Nearpeer an invaluable tool to help her make friends and develop a sense of belonging.

"Nearpeer helped me because I'm not an extrovert when it comes to interacting with people or finding new friends. It's much easier for me to make friends online rather than in person, and on Nearpeer I was able to make friends before starting college."

She also appreciated the resources available for commuter students on Nearpeer.

"There's a group for just commuter students, and I used that a lot during the summer because I was so new to the college, and there was Hunter staff in the group that I was able to ask questions. Usually, I'd have to send emails, but on Nearpeer, I was able to text them and get immediate answers. It was really helpful."



"You don't really make friends on the first day of school when you're in your classes, but when you can chat with people and make friends all summer long, it makes the first day feel much better and the campus more welcoming."



Nearpeer + HUNTER

The City University of New York

PROMISING EXPANSION

In the first ninety days of Nearpeer's launch at Hunter College, incoming Hawks spent 15,000 hours on the platform engaging with one another, building community, and preparing for college. These connections have been critical to many of the students' first-year success and has helped Hunter College provide an easier, more modern, and more effective way for students to make friendships early in their college journeys. Going forward, Hunter College is expanding Nearpeer use to connect students to more departments and support resources, and they have inspired other CUNY institutions to engage Nearpeer in the year ahead.

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

“ 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

Our peer-to-peer engagement platform acts as a transformative catalyst, fostering meaningful connections and enhancing students' sense of belonging at every stage of their journey. Leveraging advanced matching algorithms, Nearpeer facilitates personalized, meaningful, and healthy 1:1 connections tailored to each individual student. Nearpeer's clients benefit from a custom-built, safe, and inclusive virtual peer-networking platform that has proven to strengthen engagement, commitment, and community throughout the student lifecycle. This unique approach drives measurable improvements in enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates while also proving to reduce student loneliness, anxiety, and isolation. This is why so many schools partner with Nearpeer – and why Forbes calls Nearpeer “a very big deal.”



For more information, visit nearpeer.com.