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# University of St. Thomas Grows Enrollment by Connecting New Recruits Early with Nearpeer

## GROWING ENROLLMENT ACROSS ALL POPULATIONS

In recent years, Dr. Eddy Rojas, the Provost of University of St. Thomas, made his three top priorities clear to the university's senior leadership team:

***“enrollment, enrollment, and enrollment.”***

As the largest private university in Minnesota and one of America's leading Catholic research institutions, St. Thomas prides itself on recruiting a diverse range of students from across the country and around the world.

## KEY FINDINGS

St. Thomas leaders partnered with Nearpeer to improve new enrollment and help incoming students feel a sense of belonging before arriving on campus. Results include:

↓ **82%**

**lower melt rate across all incoming students** who used Nearpeer

↓ **83%+**

**lower melt rate for BIPOC and first-gen students** who used Nearpeer

↓ **77%**

**lower melt rate for international students** and 62% lower for out-of-state students who used Nearpeer

# GROWING ENROLLMENT ACROSS ALL POPULATIONS



With the impending “enrollment cliff” on the horizon and in light of some recent enrollment declines, St. Thomas leaders are being innovative in how they recruit and retain new students. One area of opportunity for the university is improving enrollment rates for their lower-converting populations, particularly out-of-state students, international students, BIPOC students, and first-generation students. This need led them to Nearpeer.

After assembling a team of leaders from enrollment, marketing, IT, and their student body, St. Thomas took a “design thinking approach” to better understand the university’s low-yielding prospects, what’s missing from their enrollment journeys, and why they might choose to enroll elsewhere instead of at St. Thomas.

They conducted a series of robust surveys, community conversations, and interviews with current students, students who melted before matriculation, and students who withdrew from the university. A prevailing theme emerged. According to Steve Ackerson, Director of IT Implementation at St. Thomas, low-converting prospects seemed skeptical that they would fit in if they enrolled at the university.

*“The most consistent themes centered on acceptance, belonging, diversity and relevant connections. These prospects wanted credible reasons to believe they would be accepted [socially] and belong at St. Thomas.”*

- Steve Ackerson, Director of IT Implementation at UST

**St. Thomas prioritized recruitment and retention for their low-yield prospects, especially:**

- BIPOC students
- First-generation students
- Out-of-state students
- International students

# GROWING ENROLLMENT ACROSS ALL POPULATIONS

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTION

What, if anything, could have changed these students' minds about fitting in at St. Thomas? The university has a diverse population, an inclusive environment, and a welcoming community – so where was the disconnect?

Feedback on this was also clear: the top reason why recruits from low-converting populations were accepting their admissions at other schools was because they had made more meaningful connections at those other institutions at some point during their admissions journeys (during a tour, for example, or at an admitted student event). These “connections” at other schools came in a wide variety, but they were all meaningful: connections with other admitted peers, connections with campus ambassadors, connections with university staff, connections with members of the campus community that they shared an affinity with, etc.... These early relationships at competing schools turned out to be the predominant reason why non-matriculating students were declining their admittance to St. Thomas and opting to enroll elsewhere rather than becoming an incoming “Tommie.”

As a university that prides itself on introspection and proactive innovation, St. Thomas made it a strategic priority to “become a university characterized by radical hospitality and a shared sense of belonging where all are welcomed.” Wanting to help prospects more easily envision themselves thriving at St. Thomas, university leaders began imagining a virtual space they could build that would allow newly admitted recruits to find friendships earlier, engage with campus resources between admitted student events and orientation, and build community, trust, and commitment in the months before depositing and matriculating.

**St. Thomas leaders wanted a solution that allowed incoming students to...**

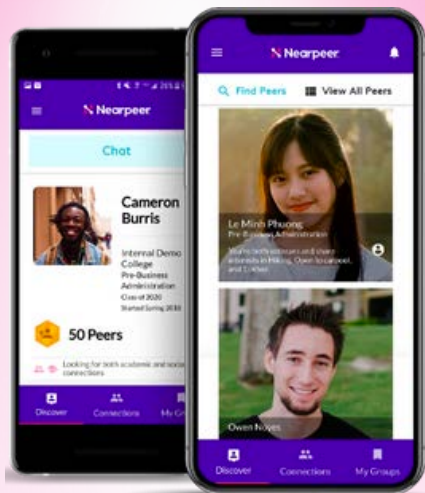
- Find friendships early
- Engage with campus resources
- Build community before they arrived on campus

# BELONGING IS THE KEY TO RECRUITMENT

## THE UNIVERSITY'S VISION FOR AN ADMITTED-STUDENT APP

The answer – and a path forward – now seemed clear: the university determined that they would build an app that would allow prospects to connect with current students “like them” based on profile matches so they could build a greater sense of belonging during the enrollment journey. “We did some projections on the time and cost involved to build this – it would have been expensive and time-consuming,” explained Ackerson. But, in the minds of university leaders, this would be time and money well spent if it could improve student belonging, help more students feel welcome at the university, and increase enrollment.

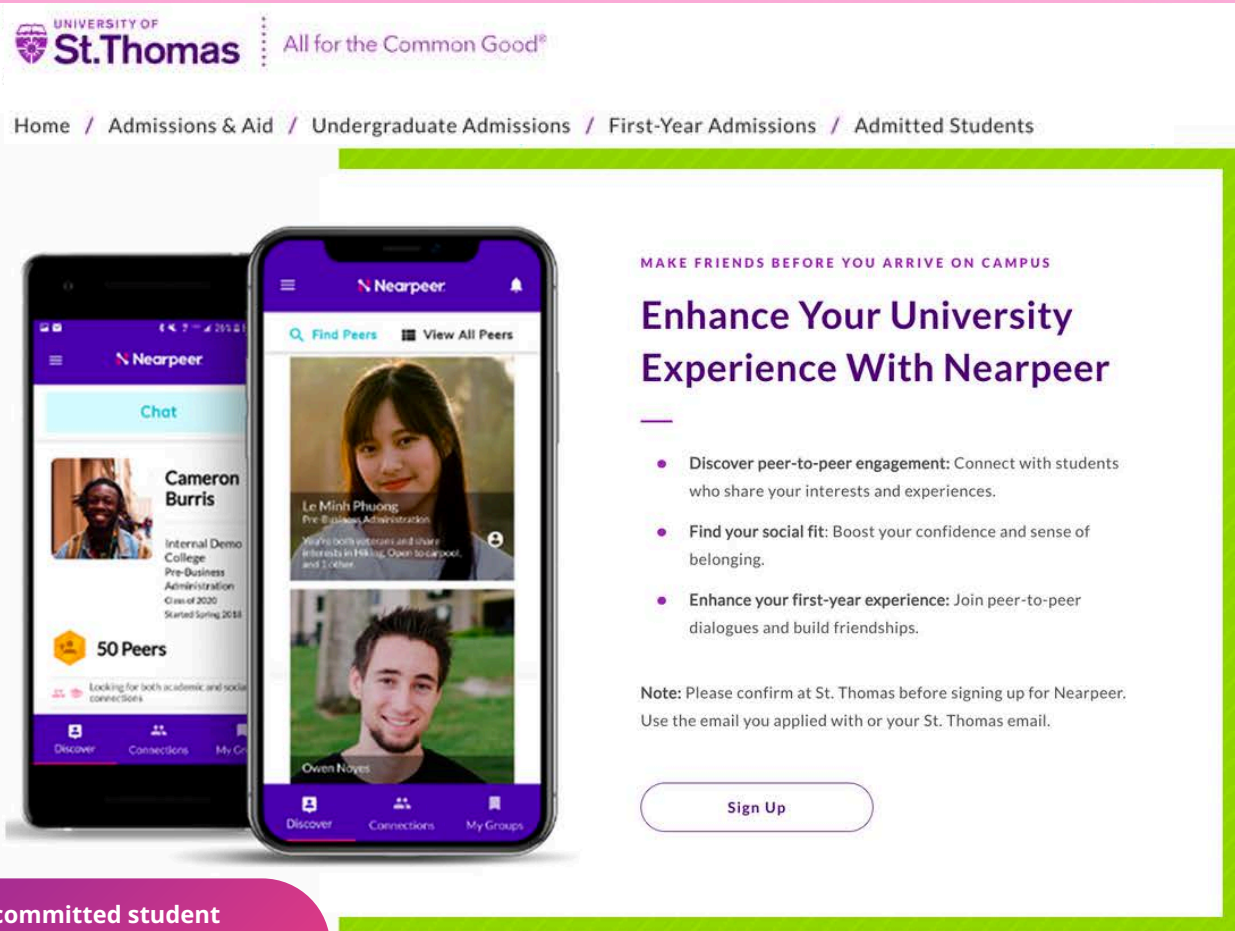
*“We were actually calling this [initiative] ‘Nearpeer,’”* chuckles Ackerson. Little did Saint Thomas leaders know that a “Nearpeer” already existed – and it would have precisely what the university was looking for.



## NEARPEER LAUNCHES AT ST. THOMAS

At the same time that the University of St. Thomas was crafting its business case to build a home-grown social connection app, administrators saw a press release about the transformative work that an app called Nearpeer was doing in conjunction with Butler University and Butler’s Institute for Well-being. Together, Nearpeer and Butler were driving higher enrollment, improved yield, reduced melt, and an enhanced student experience – all by helping incoming recruits feel a strong sense of “belonging before arriving.” “The rest was history,” Ackerson explained. “Nearpeer had everything we had considered and so much more at a fraction of the cost of building [our own app].” And, Nearpeer could launch immediately, too.

# NEARPEER LAUNCHES AT ST. THOMAS



UNIVERSITY OF St. Thomas All for the Common Good®

Home / Admissions & Aid / Undergraduate Admissions / First-Year Admissions / Admitted Students

MAKE FRIENDS BEFORE YOU ARRIVE ON CAMPUS

## Enhance Your University Experience With Nearpeer

- Discover peer-to-peer engagement: Connect with students who share your interests and experiences.
- Find your social fit: Boost your confidence and sense of belonging.
- Enhance your first-year experience: Join peer-to-peer dialogues and build friendships.

**Note:** Please confirm at St. Thomas before signing up for Nearpeer. Use the email you applied with or your St. Thomas email.

Sign Up

Each committed student received a link via email to join the the St. Thomas Nearpeer.



The platform quickly flooded with prospective Tommies making friends, engaging with campus staff, and building community in the months before orientation. Throughout the summer, Nearpeer fostered over 14,000 hours of engagement within St. Thomas's incoming class, and by the time students moved onto campus in the fall, more than 6,700 new friendships had been made. This is exactly the sort of pre-enrollment community-building that St. Thomas had envisioned. "Anecdotally, we heard that incoming students loved the opportunity to connect and make friends before coming to campus, [and] our international students were especially appreciative," noted Ackerson. But, did Nearpeer yield any quantifiable results? And how effective was this intervention for their low-yield prospects that the university was hoping to super-serve?

# NEARPEER DRIVES INCREASED ENROLLMENT, REDUCES MELT ACROSS ALL POPULATIONS

As hoped, Nearpeer delivered a highly “sticky” experience for prospective Tommies that yielded impressive results. On census day, the incoming, committed recruits who used Nearpeer had an 82% lower melt rate overall. The newly recruited Tommies on Nearpeer only had a 2.9% melt rate whereas the recruits who didn’t engage with the platform melted at a rate of 15.7%. This differential was striking, and there was a greater sense of community and enthusiasm among those who used the Nearpeer platform.

*“This app works really well for meeting new people, and I really enjoyed it. People were continuously joining Nearpeer over the course of the summer, and I’d get connection requests regularly, which hyped me up for the new year. All other social media apps are more about posting than actually connecting, and Nearpeer does a really good job of facilitating connections by showing people what they have in common. Now I’m excited for classes to start.”*

- Incoming St. Thomas Student

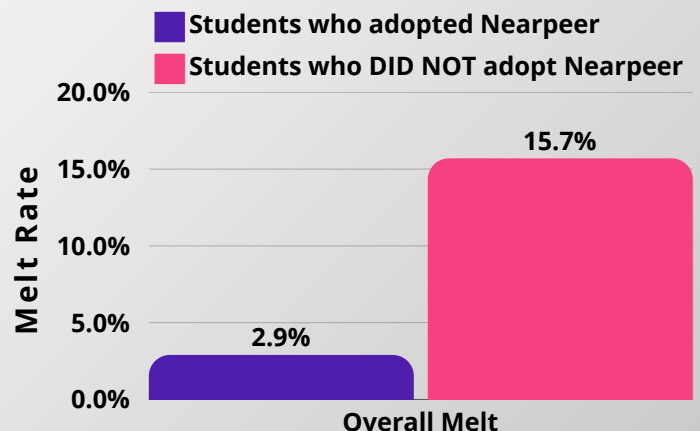
## NEARPEER’S IMPACT: INCOMING STUDENTS

↓ 82%

Lower melt rate for incoming students who used Nearpeer

*Incoming recruits who used Nearpeer over the summer only had a 2.9% melt rate whereas the recruits who hadn’t joined the platform melted at a rate of 15.7%. This drastic difference in matriculation rates was striking for the university and proved that Nearpeer was an investment well made.*

**MELT COMPARISON:**  
Incoming Students Who Adopted Nearpeer vs. Those Who Did Not



# NEARPEER DRIVES INCREASED ENROLLMENT, REDUCES MELT ACROSS ALL POPULATIONS

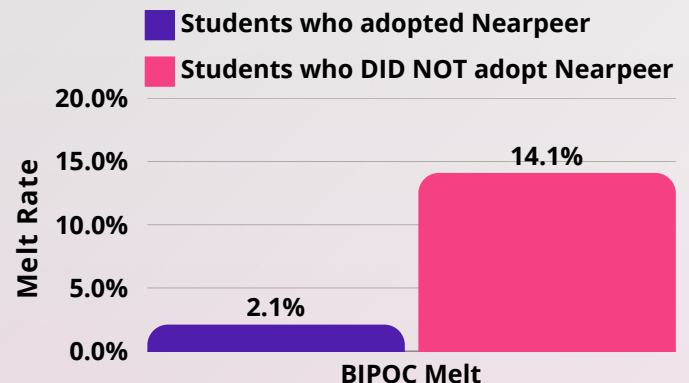
The rich community that Nearpeer was able to foster amongst pre-enrolled recruits enabled them to start building community with one another organically long before matriculating – finding best friends, roommates, study buddies, gym buddies, bandmates, and more without needing to set foot on campus. Overall, Nearpeer was an effective intervention, but did it drive any enrollment gains for BIPOC students, first-generation students, out-of-state students, and international students as the university had anticipated? The answer was a resounding “YES.”

The University of St. Thomas has a strategic plan to grow first-time, first-year (FTFY) BIPOC undergrads by 10%, and Nearpeer seemed like it could help the university achieve that goal in record time. First-time first-year Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color melt rate was down 85% at St. Thomas for students using Nearpeer. FTFY BIPOC students on Nearpeer only had a 2.1% melt rate at St. Thomas whereas FTFY BIPOC recruits not on the Nearpeer platform melted at a rate of 14.1%. This illustrated how powerful St. Thomas’s community-building efforts with Nearpeer proved to be for new BIPOC recruits.



## NEARPEER’S IMPACT: BIPOC STUDENTS

### MELT COMPARISON: First-time, First-year (FTFY) BIPOC Students Who Adopted Nearpeer vs. Those Who Did Not



*FTFY BIPOC students on Nearpeer only had a 2.1% melt rate at St. Thomas whereas FTFY BIPOC recruits not on the Nearpeer platform melted at a rate of 14.1%.*

↓ 85%

Lower BIPOC melt rate for first-time, first-year students who used Nearpeer

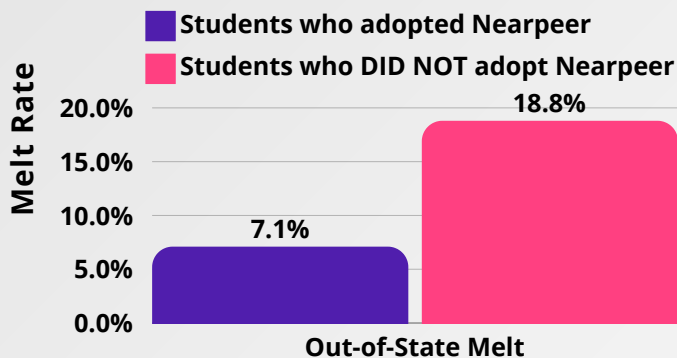
# CONNECTING STUDENTS FAR FROM CAMPUS

With nearly 80% of its student body coming from the state of Minnesota, the University of St. Thomas has long seen an opportunity to grow their out-of-state and international recruitment. For years, though, these populations have been among the highest melting or attriting students – prospective students from afar who are skeptical of leaving home and finding a sense of belonging in Minnesota, or new students who arrive on campus and develop homesickness for a lack of immediate belonging. Incoming students from out-of-state, for example, had a 62% lower melt rate for those that used the Nearpeer platform: out-of-state students on Nearpeer had a 7.1% melt rate whereas out-of-state students not utilizing the platform melted at a much higher rate of 18.8%.

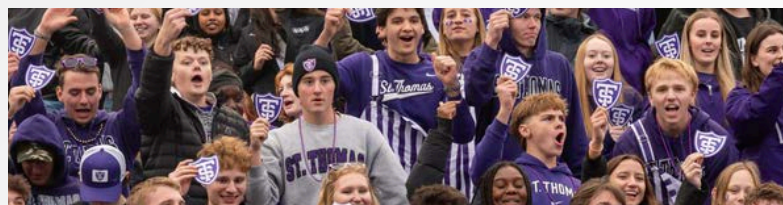
It was clear from the moment that University of St. Thomas launched Nearpeer that they were addressing an unmet need for their recruits from outside of Minnesota. International and out-of-state students had the largest Nearpeer adoption rates of any incoming population – and they saw some of the greatest benefits from the platform, too.

## NEARPEER'S IMPACT: OUT-OF-STATE STUDENTS

**MELT COMPARISON:  
Incoming Out-of-State Students  
Who Adopted Nearpeer  
vs. Those Who Did Not**



*Out-of-state students, for example, had a 62% lower melt rate if they used the Nearpeer platform: out-of-state students on Nearpeer had a 7.1% melt rate whereas out-of-state students not utilizing the platform melted at a rate of 18.8%.*





# CONNECTING STUDENTS FAR FROM CAMPUS

International students also thrived with more than half of the incoming international population downloading Nearpeer. These students found Nearpeer particularly helpful to discuss visa questions, language exchange, and cultural connections. International students enrollment was supported by the 77% lower melt rate for international students who opted to use the Nearpeer platform. This lower melt was especially significant because international students have the highest melt rate of any incoming population at St. Thomas: 52.9% did not matriculate. Such a stark contrast in impact was eye-opening for university leaders, but it wasn't a surprise. As Steve Ackerson, Director of IT Implementation at University of St. Thomas observed, it was clear that "international first-time first-year students loved the platform."

*"International first-time first-year students loved the platform."*

- Steve Ackerson, Director of IT Implementation at UST



## NEARPEER'S IMPACT: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

↓ **77%**

Lower melt rate  
for international  
students who used  
Nearpeer

**University of St. Thomas's investment in Nearpeer as a strategic tool to address these two high-risk populations paid off. Both populations achieved considerably higher start rates with the help of the Nearpeer app.**

# NEARPEER DRIVES INCREASED ENROLLMENT, REDUCES MELT ACROSS ALL POPULATIONS

## NEARPEER'S IMPACT: FIRST-GEN STUDENTS

The same was true for first-generation students transitioning into the university. Realizing these students need extra support during their incoming journey, St. Thomas hoped that Nearpeer could bring these students together, connect them with campus resources early, and make them aware of first-gen support programs unique to St. Thomas. Nearpeer proved invaluable to these students and additive to the university's ongoing efforts to better support first-generation students. In fact, first-generation students who used Nearpeer had an 83% lower melt rate, only melting at a rate of 2.8% compared to the 16.5% melt rate of first-generation students not using the Nearpeer platform.

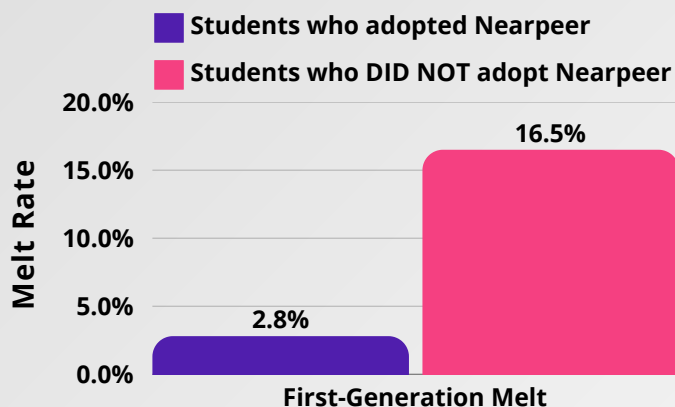


*"There were times I experienced imposter syndrome.... Do I really belong...? But then I'd spend time with the people who have supported me... and I could reset my mind, and I'd know, yes, I do belong here.*

*Those people who extended a hand in support, who said 'I'm here when you need it,' that's what kept me at St. Thomas."*

*- First-generation Student at UST*

**MELT COMPARISON:  
Incoming First-Gen Students  
Who Adopted Nearpeer  
vs. Those Who Did Not**



**First-generation students who used Nearpeer had an 83% higher enrollment, only melting at a rate of 2.8% compared to the 16.5% melt rate of first-generation students not using the Nearpeer platform.**

# EXPANDING FOR THE FUTURE

A key goal for the University of St. Thomas is to “cultivate a community where members feel welcomed and have a sense of belonging.” Nearpeer has been able to help the University of St. Thomas deliver on these promises. By creating a singular virtual space where the incoming community can come together as a whole while also allowing for individual friendships and micro-communities to flourish, Nearpeer is helping St. Thomas students come together based on shared interests, affinities, backgrounds, cultures, aspirations, and more.

“We are very pleased with our initial results and have re-upped for next year,” says Ackerson. The university is anticipating higher year-over-year persistence among students using Nearpeer, and St. Thomas leadership is already exploring new ways to leverage Nearpeer even earlier in the enrollment journey in the years ahead. Embedding Nearpeer more deeply into other key departments such as financial aid, residence life, and orientation are likely to boost enrollment and retention rates even higher. An optimistic Ackerson notes, “We have heard that incoming students loved the opportunity to connect on Nearpeer and make friends before coming to campus.”



# THE Nearpeer<sup>®</sup> 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](https://nearpeer.com).