

PUBLIC // UNIVERSITY, MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTION



**Nearpeer**  
CASE STUDY

## Improving Enrollment and Transitions for First-year, Transfer, Underserved Students

### California State University, Fresno (Fresno State)

*Fresno State serves a large population of first-generation students, community college transfer students, and underserved student populations.*

*Fresno State needed a new way to connect incoming students to student ambassadors, staff, and fellow students to improve enrollment rates and differentiation, and ensure a smooth transition.*

*Plus, after the uncertainty of 2020, the university wanted to grow the Fall 2021 incoming class size and reinforce the unique value of the Fresno State experience.*

### ABOUT //

Fresno State is a minority-serving institution serving 23,000 undergraduates, and a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) with Hispanic students representing 56% of its student body. Fresno State is also an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI). Approximately 90% of applicants are admitted and 27% enroll.

### PRIORITIES //

- Enrollment Conversion
- Improve FYE and Retention
- Better Serve Priority Populations
- Connect Incoming Students with Ambassadors and Staff

## ADDRESSING STUDENT CONCERNS & ANXIETY

As a large, public university in the California State University system, and with a largely regional draw, a high proportion of Fresno State students are first-in-family to attend college, transfers from nearby community colleges, or from underserved populations.

Each of these groups are disproportionately affected by concerns and anxiety, and often they consider questions such as, “Am I right for college?” “Will I fit in?” “Will I be successful?”

Fresno State’s leadership team is committed to continual quality improvement in recruiting and enrollment. Their commitment to serving students led them to select and launch Nearpeer in spring 2021.

In his welcome message to incoming students, Dr. Jiménez-Sandoval, Fresno State's President, acknowledged just how important belonging and community is.

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*“With Nearpeer, you’ll be able to find people in our community who have similar interests, life experiences, and more.*

***It’s a special platform just for you, our students, to get to know each other and forge a stronger sense of belonging.”***

*- Dr. Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval  
President  
California State University, Fresno*

## LAUNCH PROCESS

While Fresno State knew it was important to improve every student’s sense of belonging, the admissions team had limited capacity to take on a new initiative halfway through the Fall 2021 enrollment cycle.

So as their leadership considered potential solutions, they prioritized ease of launch, plus the impact on staff workload during and after implementation. They saw that Nearpeer would help Fresno’s staff to do their work more efficiently.

Phong Yang, Director of Admissions and Recruitment, noted:

## LAUNCH PROCESS, cont'd.

*"[Nearpeer] is definitely a turnkey solution...no extensive set-up on our end, we provide the information, then the Nearpeer team does all of the set-up for us - that's the beautiful part of it."*

Within a few weeks of partnering with Nearpeer, the app was configured and built to support incoming Fresno State students for Fall 2021.

The admissions team then shared information about Nearpeer with internal stakeholders and prepared to invite committed students with a series of customized emails, text messages, social media posts, and virtual events.

## A CREATIVE YIELDING APPROACH

Fresno State first launched Nearpeer as a yielding tool, as a new incentive for admitted students to commit—and commit early. All accepted students are invited to attend their "Preview Days," which are intended to help accepted students get a better sense of potential majors, campus organizations, and student resources.

Their enrollment team uses this engagement to build commitment and student confidence, especially among students who wanted additional confirmation that Fresno State was the right fit for them academically—and socially. So, Nearpeer was first

introduced at their Spring 2021 Preview Day, and students were told that they would receive an invitation to join their community on the app as soon as they officially committed to Fresno State, which created a new motivation for students to commit sooner.

Days later hundreds of students committed and unlocked their Nearpeer access to meet new peers and future classmates.

“

***"Nearpeer creates a momentum [for students]...a sense of belonging, but also a sense of confidence that they are walking into an environment where they feel they already know people...students, staff or faculty."***

- Phong Yang  
Director of Admissions & Recruitment  
California State University, Fresno

## IMPROVED TRANSITIONS

Once incoming students commit, they are required to attend a series of orientation events called “Dog Days,” named after Fresno State’s mascot, the Bulldog.

Nearpeer is integrated into Dog Days and promoted by student leaders to catalyze connections between new students who are also attending that orientation. Often these student leaders will co-host a group on Nearpeer for each orientation cohort, making it seamless for these students to get to know each other before their orientation begins.

Students are also able to easily find and connect with other students based on their major, residence hall, interests, and more.

“

*“Something I really love about Nearpeer is that **I’m able to bridge the gap with students** ... I connect with them all year long...it’s amazing and I love Nearpeer”*

- Alejandro, current student and Fresno State Student Ambassador California State University, Fresno

## CONNECTING STUDENTS WITH STAFF

Through the admissions journey at Fresno State, Nearpeer not only fosters engagement between students but also between students and staff in a comfortable, intuitive virtual space. Students are proactively encouraged to connect with student ambassadors, student leaders, and university staff from across campus.

As part of the Nearpeer program, Fresno State also utilizes easy-to-create Nearpeer groups on focused topics, such as Financial Aid. In these groups students can comfortably ask questions and get the support they need without increasing the burden on staff.

The financial aid team answers questions one to two times per week. This reduces the volume of inbound calls and emails because students are able to see if their question has already been asked by another student and answered.

So, instead of answering the same question via email multiple times for dozens of individual students, the team only gets the question once—and then the students have the information they need.

# 2,000+

incoming students actively used Nearpeer

# 49

avg. unique (repeat) uses of Nearpeer  
per incoming student

# 24

avg. number of new peer-to-peer  
connections per student

# 2.85

increased likelihood for Hispanic students  
who used Nearpeer to enroll  
(vs. those who did not)

## OUTCOMES

Fresno State was highly successful in serving first-year and transfer students with Nearpeer to improve enrollment and foster a smooth transition to their university.

Nearpeer was broadly adopted across the incoming fall 2021 cohort. More than 2,000 of their new students actively used Nearpeer to make connections with their new Bulldog family.

These students not only joined the Nearpeer platform but they returned repeatedly to find and connect with their peers. On average, each student included 11 interests, returned to Nearpeer 49 times, and made 24 one-to-one connections with other students.

As a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), it was particularly important to measure and understand Nearpeer's impact on Hispanic students.

Data analysis showed that Hispanic students who used Nearpeer were 2.85 times more likely to enroll ( $p < .001$ ), compared to those who did not use Nearpeer.



## A DEEPER DIVE ON TRANSFER STUDENTS

Fresno State exceeded their yield expectations from the Preview Days where Nearpeer was introduced to encourage early student commitment. They also improved conversion specifically for transfer students. For example, transfer students who used Nearpeer were 2.67 times more likely to enroll than non-users, and was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

Transfer students who used Nearpeer had a 9.2% melt rate, 57% lower than the 21.4% melt rate for transfer students who did not use Nearpeer.

Fresno State leadership values the way Nearpeer helps new students—freshmen and transfers—make connections across a wider geographic area, as shown below, where peer connections initiated by transfer students are shown in blue, and other users in red. (See Figure 1.)

In addition, Fresno State's community college transfer partners understand and appreciate the impact of Nearpeer on successful student transfer and transition within their ecosystem.

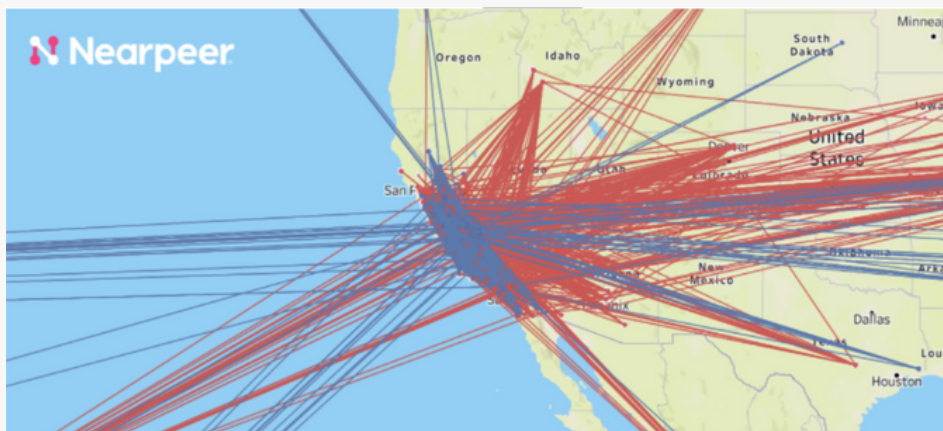
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*“They have a lot of responsibilities at home... to connect with others who might live in their community to carpool to Fresno State is a benefit to students.”*

- Dr. Kristin Clark  
Chancellor

West Hills Community College District  
From Community College Daily article, "Nearpeer helps students form close connections," Oct. 27, 2021

**FIGURE 1: 52,000+ NEW PEER CONNECTIONS, SHOWN ACCORDING TO STUDENT HOMETOWN**



### Key:

Blue lines represent connections initiated by transfer students.

Red lines represent connections initiated by other students.

## A DEEPER DIVE ON TRANSFER STUDENTS, cont'd.

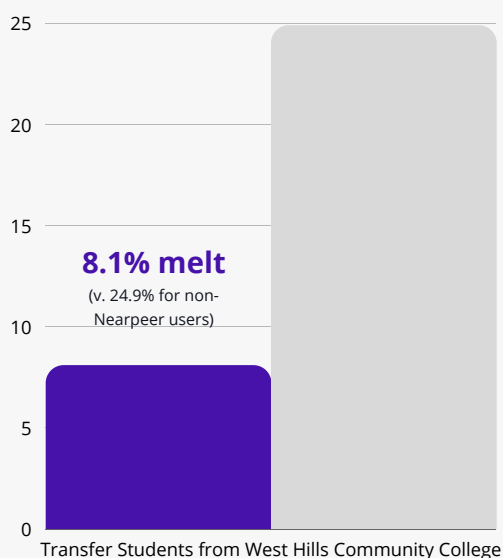
For example, peer engagement had a measurable impact on graduates from West Hills Community College.

Among the West Hills graduates who committed to transfer to Fresno State, the students who used Nearpeer were three times more likely to show up for the start of fall classes at Fresno State.

More specifically for these students, there was a 8.1% melt rate for Nearpeer users vs. 24.9% for those who did not use Nearpeer.

*(See Figure 2 below.)*

**FIGURE 2: TRANSFER STUDENT MELT RATE, NEARPEER USERS VS. NON-USERS**



## WHAT STUDENTS SAY

For new students across different populations, Nearpeer is reducing anxiety about making new, genuine connections with others. This peer engagement starts in the recruiting cycle and continues on through their first-year experience to foster a sense of belonging. Current student Alejandro said, "Through Nearpeer I was able to help [a student] at orientation...and then we were able to actually meet up. We connected and became really close friends...that would have never happened without Nearpeer."

Allison, an incoming non-traditional transfer student continued, "I've made some connections in my major, but I also have two kids. [In Nearpeer,] I was able to connect with other people who are also parents. I was able to join a group with other students who are also parents. It makes me feel better about going to a new school."

Malac, another transfer student, said, "Even though all of my classes are online, I'm still able to connect with other students who are majoring in business and talk to them about that. I also really like the fact that [Nearpeer] shows you the types of students that have interests together. It builds a connection right away."

Nearpeer also helps students find a best-fit roommate, which is valuable at Fresno State to supplement their existing housing solution, StarRez.

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*“Even though all of my classes are online, I’m still able to connect with other students who are majoring in business and talk to them about that.*

*I also really like the fact that [Nearpeer] shows you the types of students that have interests together. **It builds a connection right away.**”*

- Malac, incoming transfer student  
California State University, Fresno

### WHAT STUDENTS SAY, cont'd.

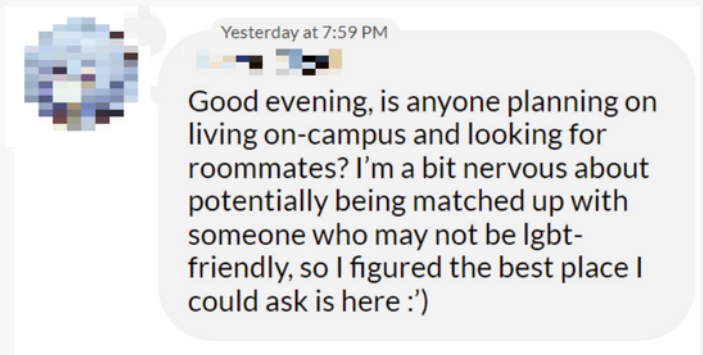
Eric, a new student from Los Angeles, said, “I wouldn’t have found a roommate if it weren’t for Nearpeer...I was also able to meet other musicians, people who have the same musical interests and play the same instrument as me.”

Another new student utilized a Nearpeer group focused on LGBTQIA+ inclusion to find a roommate, saying:

“Good evening, is anyone planning on living on-campus and looking for roommates? I’m a bit nervous about potentially being matched up with someone who many not be lgbt-friendly, so I figured the best place I could ask is here :)”

(See Figure 3)

**FIGURE 3: CREATING SAFE SPACES, LGBTQIA+ AND ALLIES GROUP**



### EXPANDING NEARPEER'S REACH

After the first successful year with Nearpeer, the Fresno State enrollment team is expanding use of the platform to further improve yield. Now, students are invited to join Nearpeer from the moment they receive their acceptance letter, allowing Fresno State to stand out from competing institutions.

Other campus departments are also looking at the opportunity to leverage Nearpeer to increase engagement in the classroom, build community in their residence halls, and improve the student experience with new insight on their expectations and preferences.



IMPACT //

California State University, Fresno

52,000

new peer-to-peer connections made

6.3

avg. hours of Nearpeer use  
per incoming student

52

avg. unique (repeat) uses of Nearpeer  
per incoming student

2.9x

higher enrollment rate for incoming  
Hispanic students who used Nearpeer

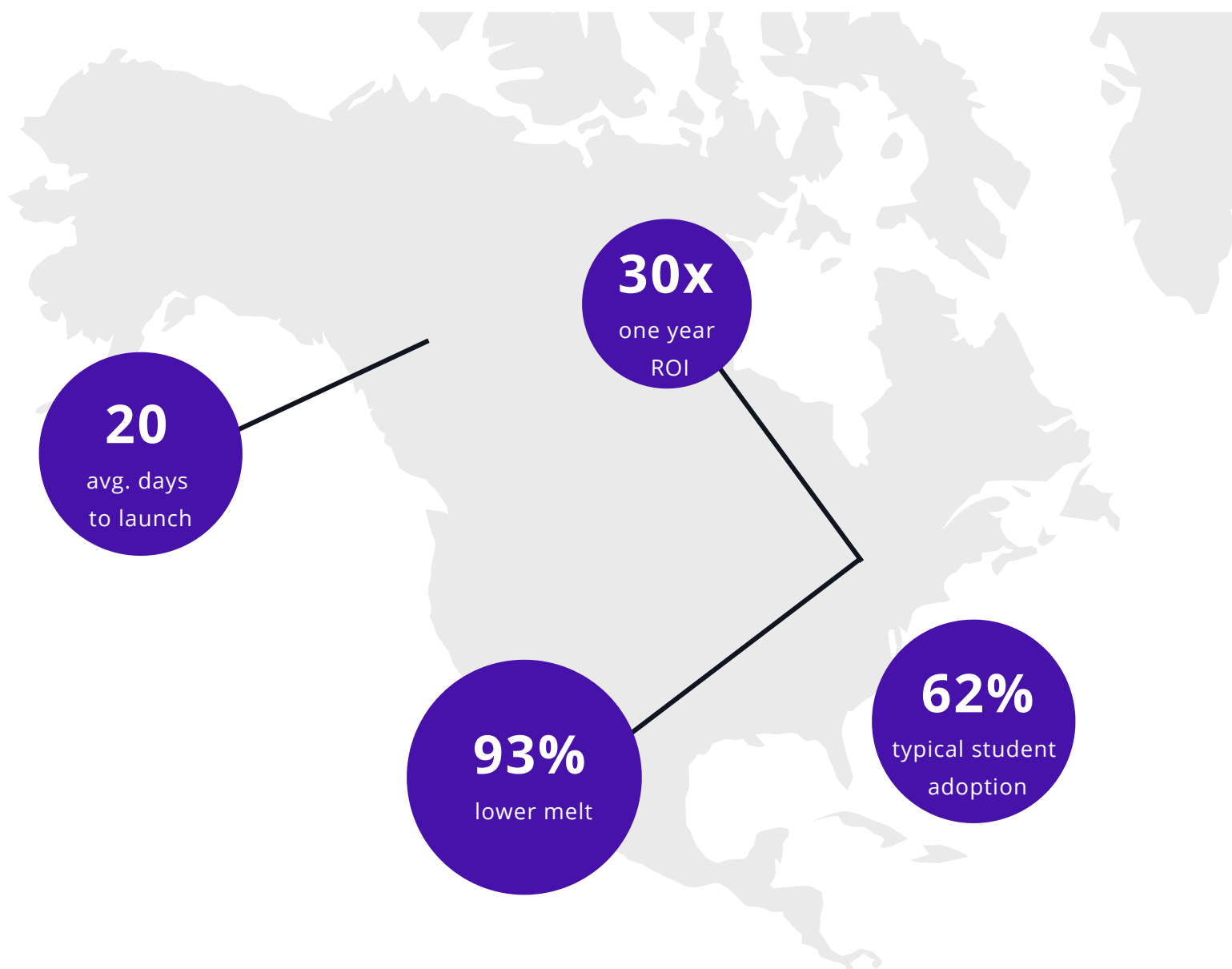
2.7x

higher enrollment rate for incoming  
transfer students who used Nearpeer

57%

lower melt rate for incoming  
transfer students who used Nearpeer

## OUTCOMES ACROSS OUR PARTNER COMMUNITY



For more information, visit [nearpeer.com](https://nearpeer.com).

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