



# Improving Belonging and Engagement to Serve Current Students and Increase Enrollment

## The University of Oklahoma

*The University of Oklahoma (OU) is consistently ranked in the top 5 of schools with the "Happiest Students, as reported by Princeton Review. OU leadership is known for taking a student-centered approach, listening to student needs, and prioritizing community-building as part of the student experience.*

*However, their 2019 National Survey on Student Engagement results indicated that their first-year students desired a greater institutional emphasis on support for their overall well-being. When the pandemic shifted all classes and ...*

## ABOUT //

The University of Oklahoma is a large public university with an R1 Carnegie classification.

Approximately 83% of applicants are admitted and 34% of admitted students enroll.

## PRIORITIES //

- Increase enrollment, satisfaction, and first-year retention
- Improve outcomes for priority populations
- Connect incoming students with staff and ambassadors

## INTRODUCTION, cont'd.

*... support services online in March 2020, OU leadership was deeply concerned about the impact on student well-being, including loneliness and perceived isolation.*

*In addition, new students starting in Fall 2020 were not able to benefit from OU's full orientation experience, new student welcome, and other introductions to the community that were originally planned as a critical part of the first year experience (FYE).*

*To address these challenges, OU's Division of Student Affairs teamed up with OU's Student Government Association, and then also later with OU's Division of Enrollment Management to find a solution.*

## FIGURE 1: OU LAUNCHES NEARPEER



## BELONGING MATTERS

One of the key pillars of OU's strategic plan is to "become a place of belonging and emotional growth for all students, faculty, staff, and alumni," and the peer-to-peer engagement in Nearpeer supports their focus on creating "a supportive environment that fosters inclusion, belonging, and satisfaction."

As such, OU leadership has taken important steps to improve connectedness and combat loneliness, which is more important than ever given the continued, pandemic-related challenges for all students and, in particular, for underserved and underrepresented groups.

Student Affairs leadership, in collaboration with the Student Government Association, decided to tackle student isolation and loneliness head-on with Nearpeer. Fall 2020 was hard for most students, but it was acutely different and difficult for newer students. They—like other new students across the world—didn't have the opportunity to connect with their peers or the campus community.

The first year experience was profoundly disrupted by the pandemic, so OU quickly launched Nearpeer to those freshmen during their spring term. (See Figure 1.)

Within weeks, Nearpeer's positive impact on student-to-student engagement resulted in a decision to expand across campus departments and to serve students even earlier in the student journey.

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*"We utilize Nearpeer to combat loneliness and isolation, increase student satisfaction, and provide connection and belonging."*

- Brynn Daves  
Assistant Vice President and  
Associate Dean of Students  
The University of Oklahoma

## **BELONGING MATTERS, cont'd.**

OU decided to use Nearpeer to help current and future students build connections every step of the way. First, the Admissions team invited incoming, committed Fall 2021 students to join Nearpeer, then it was used to accelerate roommate selection and housing contracts, followed by integration into summer orientation and new student programs, and finally it was used to drive focused retention and recruit-back campaigns with priority student populations.

## **INCOMING STUDENTS & THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE**

Another priority in OU's Strategic Plan is to:

*"Create a new student orientation program which includes access for all incoming students in a common experience that welcomes them to campus and introduces*

*them to the University and its cultural expectations."*

OU created an innovative, new student orientation program that included a shared experience and access for all students. As part of this, Nearpeer became a way to augment the community experience and better serve all students.

This was especially true for students who are typically more introverted and would otherwise participate differently in orientation. Nearpeer became an integral part of how incoming students were welcomed to the OU community and their sense of belonging with their future classmates.

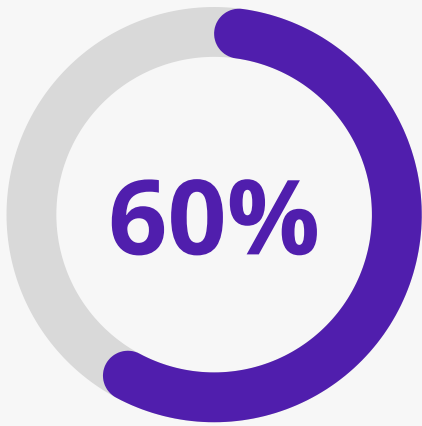
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*"I didn't know anyone from my school who was going to be going to OU, so I thought I should establish a good little circle of friends. I really liked being able to see everyone's interests and majors. I've never seen that in other apps where you try to meet people. That was my favorite aspect."*

- Steffy, incoming new student  
The University of Oklahoma

## INCOMING STUDENTS & THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE, cont'd.

Under OU's leadership, more than 60% of the new first year students voluntarily created Nearpeer profiles and started making new one-to-one connections with other students in the OU community.



60%+ of new OU students adopted Nearpeer before they began classes

## INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES & NEARPEER USE CASES

### Roommate Selection, LGBTQIA+ Inclusion, Recruit Back, and More

Recognizing how useful Nearpeer is to improve student connection, leaders from other campus departments explored how they might leverage the platform to help achieve their student success goals. This also included serving students who might be seeking friends or have trepidation about being accepted within their college community.

## Roommate Selection

For example, the residence life team saw the opportunity to solve a persistent challenge: student agency in finding a best-fit roommate – given how important roommate fit is to a student's overall happiness, academic performance and completion. OU's existing roommate matching process was time-consuming for staff, and made even more so because many students requested roommate changes through the first few weeks of school. In partnership with the OU housing staff, the roommate matching process was improved by harnessing Nearpeer's student-matching algorithms, and complemented to their existing housing management software, StarRez.

Nearpeer helped students find roommates based on personalized attributes such as "early bird" or "night owl," as well as the other 1,200+ interests and affinities. Students were then encouraged to connect with their potential roommate matches and then confirm their decision with housing. Celine, an out-of-state Class of 2024 student, used Nearpeer to find a roommate. She said, *"I found my roommate through Nearpeer; she's super sweet, I am so excited...I also met one of my closest friends, Ashley, through Nearpeer. I am so excited to meet her in person in the fall."*



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*"I found my roommate through Nearpeer; she's super sweet, I am so excited..."*

*"I also met one of my closest friends, Ashley, through Nearpeer. I am so excited to meet her in person in the fall."*

- Celine, out-of-state, incoming student  
The University of Oklahoma

## **INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES & NEARPEER USE CASES LGBTQIA+ Inclusion, cont'd.**

In addition, Nearpeer supports OU's LGBTQIA+ students and their allies in collaboration with OU's Gender Equality Center. OU leadership also provided strategic advice for Nearpeer's product innovation to support user pronouns, rather than gender, for all students and staff.

The result is greater inclusion between students, as well as an improved understanding of students' identities by student-facing staff.

These programs also include new Nearpeer enhancements for LGBTQIA+ friendly roommate matching.

## **Recruit Back Program**

Additionally, Nearpeer is used in OU's efforts to recruit back students who left the university, recognizing that many of those students may not have developed a deep sense of belonging during their prior student experience. The Graduation and Persistence Support team now offers Nearpeer as one of the key resources for students considering a return to OU.

*(See Figure 2 on following page.)*

## **ADDITIONAL OUTCOMES**

In the OU Daily newspaper, OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. announced that the Class of 2025 is: "the largest, most diverse, and most academically qualified class in [OU's] history."

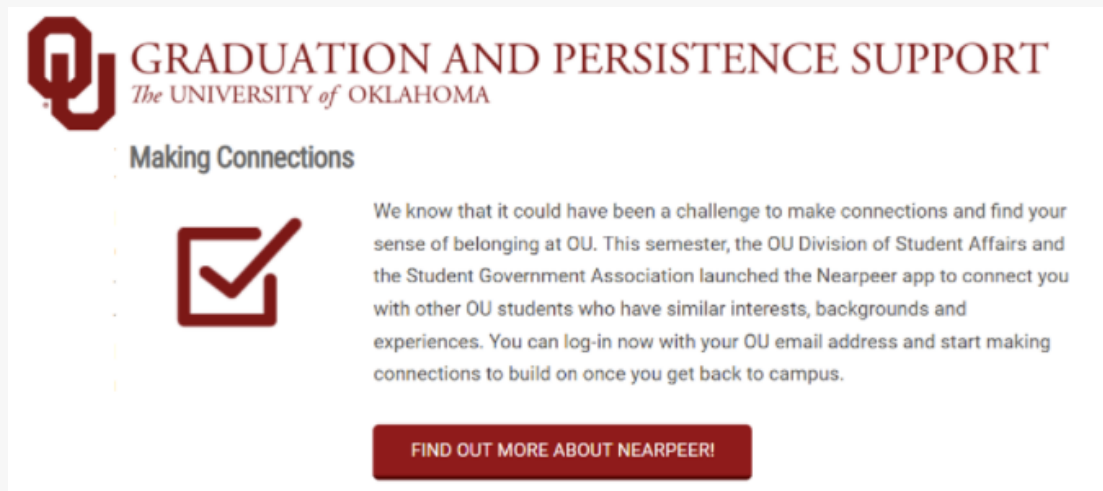
2,800+

profiles created by Class of 2025 before  
classes began

25

average number of new one-to-one connections  
for Class of 2025

**FIGURE 2: USING NEARPEER TO IMPROVE PERSISTENCE AND GRADUATION**



### **ADDITIONAL OUTCOMES, cont'd.**

In Fall 2021, the University of Oklahoma enrolled the largest undergraduate class in its history. This class is its most diverse, including 38% minorities and 25% first-generation students.

For the Class of 2025, more than 2,800 new students created Nearpeer profiles and used the platform. On average, each of those students entered ten specific interests, used the app in 26 unique sessions, and made 25 one-to-one connections with other students.

In total, that cohort alone spent over 8,500 hours connecting with others on the platform.

Jack, a new out-of-state student, said he found other students with similar interests who were also majoring in Meteorology.

*"We plan on hanging out and can be study buddies. I really like to fish, it is super relaxing for me..."*

*"I was able to find a couple of guys and we plan to fish on the weekends when we don't have much to do."*

- Jack, out-of-state, incoming student  
The University of Oklahoma

### **NEXT STEPS**

As Nearpeer continues to have a tangible impact on the student experience at OU, their Assessment team is taking a deeper dive on the observed strong correlations between Nearpeer use, enrollment rates, and persistence. They are now exploring Nearpeer adoption as an element in their predictive modeling of student outcomes.

IMPACT //

## The University of Oklahoma

**60%+**

new students used Nearpeer

**92,255**

new peer-to-peer connections made  
overall in Nearpeer

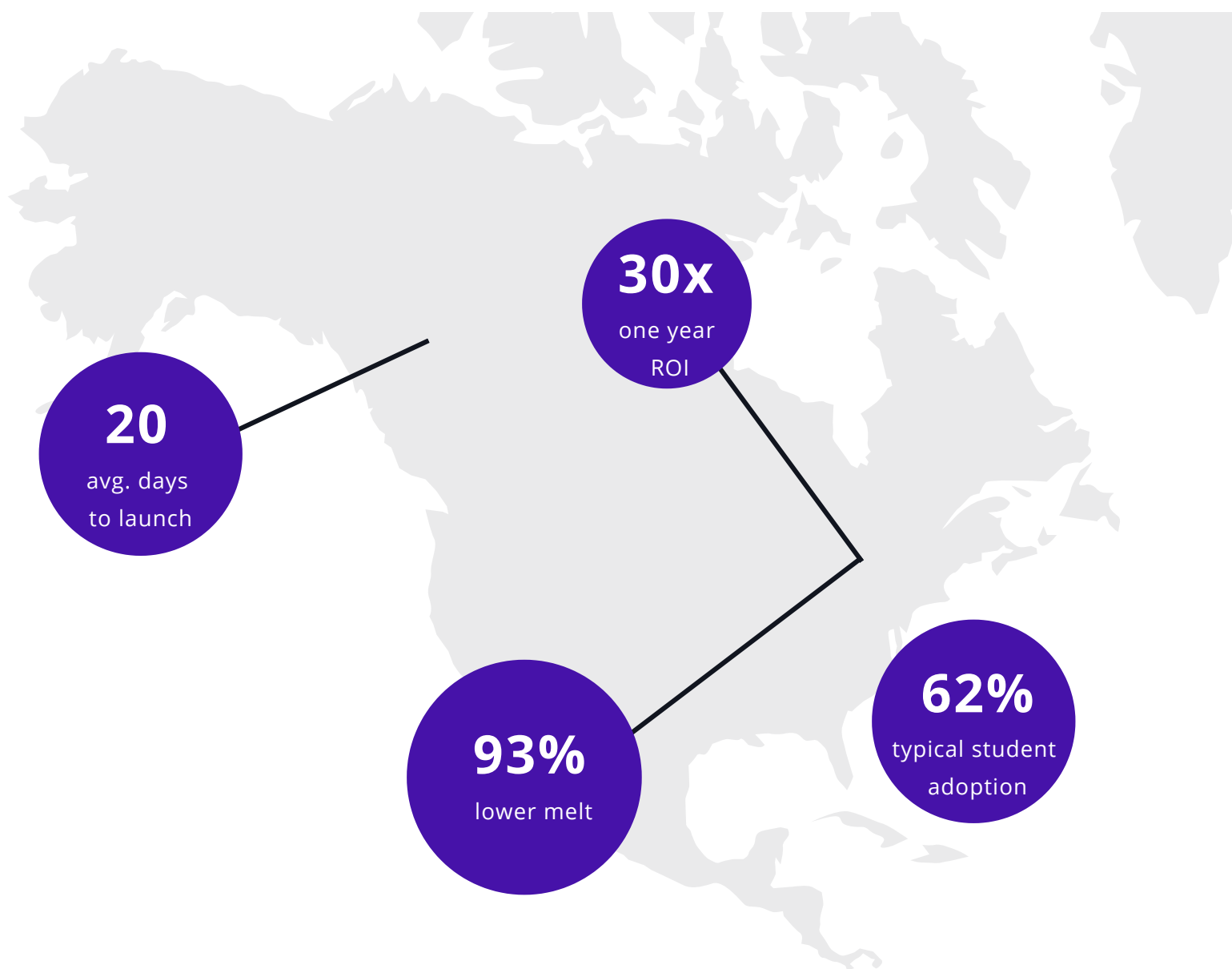
**80%**

of Nearpeer users made  
new connections in Nearpeer

**26**

new peer-to-peer connections  
made per student in Nearpeer

## OUTCOMES ACROSS OUR PARTNER COMMUNITY



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

CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

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