



THEY BELONG:
Full Year Results of Nearpeer's Impact on
First-generation, Black and Transfer Students at
California State University, Northridge



One of the largest universities in the country, California State University, Northridge (CSUN) is an urban, comprehensive university that delivers award-winning undergraduate and graduate programs to more than 36,000 students annually and counts more than 400,000 alumni who fuel the region’s economy.

Since its founding in 1958, CSUN has made a significant and long-term economic impact on California, generating nearly \$1.9 billion in economic impact and nearly 12,000 jobs each year. CSUN is a Hispanic Serving Institution ranking amongst the top twenty in the nation in graduating Latinx students.

More than 70 percent of CSUN students are first-generation college students, and 60 percent come from historically underrepresented groups. Money magazine consistently ranks CSUN among the nation’s “most transformative” colleges for putting diverse students on the path to higher career earnings.



Nearpeer was founded in 2017 to help address the loneliness and isolation crisis in colleges and our communities. Nearpeer’s mission is focused on building a healthy sense of belonging for all people.

Nearpeer catalyzes meaningful connections and a sense of belonging throughout the postsecondary journey. With Nearpeer, more students feel that they belong, enabling higher education leaders to improve enrollment, equity, and the student experience.

Nearpeer’s peer-to-peer Platform for Belonging™ and matching algorithms are highly effective to foster meaningful, one-to-one connection for all students, including introverts.

Each institution’s exclusive, virtual community reinforces a sense of belonging and connection throughout the student lifecycle, which results in increased yield, reduced melt, and improved retention. Nearpeer also serves the parents of students, lifelong learning programs, and employee communities to improve recruiting, retention, wellness, and inclusion.

To learn more, visit www.nearpeer.com.

Introduction

The importance of student “sense of belonging” and its impact on college enrollment has been well documented in numerous studies. The emergent challenge is finding the scalable interventions that can have a substantial and positive impact on this critical student need. This report details a study by California State University, Northridge (CSUN) on a specific intervention designed to drive positive peer engagement amongst students and build that elusive sense of belonging.

In the Summer of 2022, CSUN embarked on a randomized control trial (RCT) to directly measure the impact of Nearpeer’s peer-to-peer platform on student enrollment, retention, and inclusion within the incoming 12,000 student Fall 2022 class. CSUN is one of the largest and most diverse universities in the United States, and these new students include both first-time, full-time and transfers with a majority being minority students and a high proportion being first-generation.

CSUN designed this study as an RCT in order to isolate and directly measure the impact of Nearpeer on enrollment outcomes. CSUN randomly assigned the incoming class into two groups: half as a control group and half of the students with access to Nearpeer’s Platform for Belonging. The institution continued its RCT longitudinally – over a full year – to determine the true impact on new enrollment and first-year retention. The university formed the two groups from the 12,000 admitted students who, by the Spring of 2022, had committed to enroll as new students for the upcoming Fall term. The enrollment status was tracked at key milestones beginning at Fall 2022 census and continued through Spring term 2023 and, finally, enrollment status as of Fall of 2023. This offers a holistic view into what works during students’ highest-risk transitions, which occur as they begin their first year and as they transition to their second year.

The results were clear by mid-year that students who had used Nearpeer were much more likely to matriculate and persist through their first semester and return for the second semester. The progress among first-generation, Black, and transfer students was especially promising.

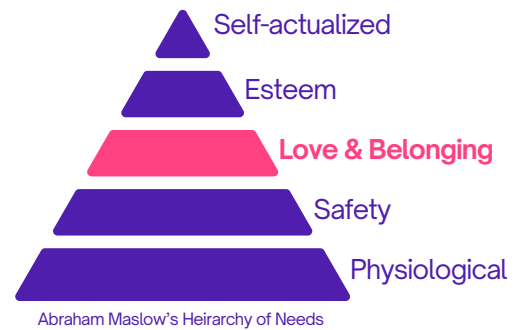
The question remained: would these students continue on and complete their first year? Would they plan to return for a second year at CSUN? This report now details the latest findings and answers: yes.

Overall, any student who used Nearpeer was more likely to matriculate and persist at CSUN, but this was overwhelmingly true for Black students, with significant gains among transfer and first-generation students, too. What does this mean for CSUN and the higher education community as a collective community?

Student connection and belonging matter when it comes to the future of higher education.

Technology Rooted in the Science of Human Needs

Belonging is a basic human need, central to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (right), and is proven to serve as a source of motivation for human behavior and overall wellbeing. Unfortunately, a sense of belonging is far too low among today's students. The U.S. Surgeon General's 2023 advisory identified that loneliness, isolation, and anxiety are reaching all-time highs, with a negative impact on wellness.



Nearpeer is created in alignment with the Surgeon General's guidance to "intentionally design technology that fosters healthy dialogue and relationships, including across diverse communities and perspectives."

Methodology: "gold standard" experimental design

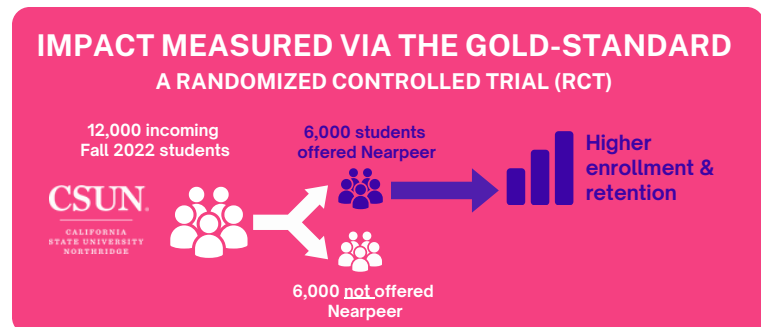
With over ten specific support programs already in place for incoming students – including orientation, peer mentoring, campus apps, support groups, and others – CSUN wanted to directly measure Nearpeer's impact.

To fully understand Nearpeer's specific impact on students, CSUN decided to split their 12,000 student incoming class evenly and randomly into two groups: One group of 6,000 would receive access to Nearpeer, and the other 6,000 would not. This randomization was also applied to each sub-population within each group to ensure these two groups were equal in their demographics.

All 12,000 students had access to all of the other existing CSUN services and supports – the experimental group had access to just one more, the Nearpeer platform. Access to the platform was tightly controlled and there was no crossover between the groups, e.g., no members of the control group were able to use Nearpeer throughout the study.

This research design is known as a randomized controlled trial, or RCT, and it is the gold-standard for accurately measuring the effects of a single intervention.

RCT studies have high accuracy but are far less common than other, less precise forms of measurement because the "clarity yielded by RCTs does not come easy," as noted in the National Science Foundation's article, "The bubble-bursting, causality-revealing awesomeness of randomized controlled trials."



CSUN's study is one of the largest, most rigorous RCTs of any student support intervention.

Key Findings

Institutions across America experience similar pressures to CSUN, given the nearly 10% drop in national college enrollment since its 2010 peak, a worsening “enrollment cliff” expected, and the vast equity gap in college enrollment and success.

Amidst these pressures, CSUN sought new approaches to grow and better support students to build on the more than 10 established support programs for new students. The goal of this program was to improve new enrollment and retention, and do so without much university staff time required to run the program.

CSUN selected Nearpeer’s Platform for Belonging and introduced it to their incoming “committed” students in the summer of 2022 to build peer-to-peer connections and community early, even before they arrive on campus.

CSUN wanted to foster meaningful peer connections between incoming students to 1) improve students’ enrollment and retention rates, 2) create an additional support network for underserved students, and 3) reduce pressure on staff-led interventions.

The results were groundbreaking.

The Nearpeer program drove outsized impact on matriculation and persistence:

- **17% more Black** students enrolled and persisted
- **8% more transfer** students enrolled and persisted
- **4% more first-generation** students enrolled and persisted
- **4% more students overall** enrolled and persisted

These results represent **dramatic gains in equity**, a significant **500+ student annual increase in enrollment**, and **over \$7M in tuition revenue each Fall class** when Nearpeer is offered to all new students.

SIGNIFICANT GAINS AMONG UNDERSERVED STUDENTS

+17%

BLACK STUDENT
ENROLLMENT

+8%

TRANSFER STUDENT
ENROLLMENT

+4%

FIRST-GEN STUDENT
ENROLLMENT

“Our black student population at CSUN has been on the decline.

So to see [Nearpeer] encouraging our black students to consider CSUN and ultimately enroll is a pretty significant encouragement for our institution.”

*- Dr. David Dufault-Hunter
AVP for Enrollment Services
California State University, Northridge (CSUN)*

Greatest Gains Among Black Students

CSUN's Black student enrollment was on the decline. What's more, Black student enrollment and student success is a priority within the California State University (CSU) system, as outlined in their report, *Advancing Black Student Success and Elevating Black Excellence*.

In this context, the success that CSUN achieved from their Nearpeer program was even more significant: when offered Nearpeer, 17% more incoming Black students remained enrolled at CSUN the following Fall 2023 term. Now, as of Fall 2023, overall Black enrollment has increased, too.

Nearpeer's impact is the combination of **reduced summer melt and higher first-year retention**. Students leveraged Nearpeer to make friends, find roommates, identify study buddies, among other factors for belonging and success. These new relationships build resilience and become a support network, improving students' overall commitment and success.

Growth Among Transfer Students

Nearpeer's impact for transfer students is seen from the point of initial commitment all the way through the start of their second year at CSUN, resulting in an eight percent (8%) lift in enrollment for the students offered Nearpeer. The platform also made it easy to find other students who had transferred from the same community college and are on a similar academic or life journey.

Progress with First-Generation Students

Nearly one half of all California State University, Northridge students are the first in their family to enroll in college. Among CSUN's Latino students almost two-thirds are first generation.

In supporting first-gen students with Nearpeer, CSUN observed a four percent (4%) higher combined enrollment and retention rate for this population.

Being a first-gen student can be daunting – many first-generation students deal with feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and impostor syndrome. Parents and families might lack the context to understand and support their children with their aspirations. This is why CSUN sought to create a turnkey program that could help first-gen students connect with resources, get questions answered, stay informed, and build relationships with peers and mentors to help make the transition easier.



"Having access to Nearpeer alleviated my stress. I was able to make connections with people who also worked full time. I was really stressing about being a full-time student and working full time, and it was really good to hear that I wasn't the only one."

-Tatiana, CSUN student



"I met a cool group that I'm still friends with. A lot of first year and transferring students were in the same boat as me and nervous about how to meet new people. Nearpeer helped alleviate my own anxiety and build my own community on campus."

-Blake, CSUN student

Overall enrollment increase

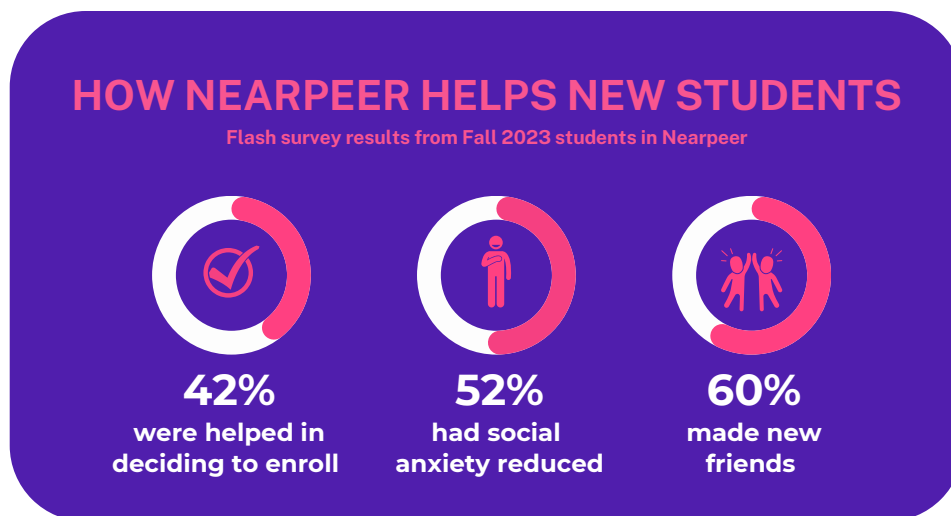
The overall impact of the Nearpeer program on enrollment was large for any one intervention, especially given the ease of launch and very limited staff involvement required. CSUN observed an overall 4% lift in enrollment for the entire group of students offered Nearpeer.

These results represent a significant 500+ student annual increase in enrollment, and over \$7M in tuition revenue each Fall class, when Nearpeer is offered to all new students.

The program results reported in this RCT are for the entire group of students offered Nearpeer, consistent with an intent-to-treat design. This significant overall impact is the result of just 26% adoption of Nearpeer by eligible students. Student adoption was lower than Nearpeer’s customary targets of 40-60% voluntary adoption because, during the RCT, invited students only learned about Nearpeer from email and text-based invitations. It would not have been appropriate to integrate Nearpeer into events and communications that reached the 6,000 incoming students not invited to Nearpeer, such as new student orientation, admitted student events, and other programs.

As a result, the enrollment increase from Nearpeer is likely to be even higher after the RCT because the program can be more deeply embedded into the overall onboarding experience, resulting in higher overall student adoption – and, therefore, even greater reach and impact.

A flash survey of Fall ‘23 CSUN students with over 250 respondents showed that Nearpeer continues to serve important needs, such as helping students in their enrollment decision, reducing social anxiety, and making new friends.



“

Nearpeer creates a community that is safe and inclusive. It's so student-centric [and] the setup was so easy.

- Aaron Lindberg, Director of Admissions, CSUN

”

Higher Education Implications

With the so-called “enrollment cliff” now only one recruitment cycle away, colleges and universities must innovate to protect their institutions from nearly two decades of birthrate decline and the continued skepticism of the value of a four-year degree. The anticipated additional 15% drop in enrollment expected between 2025 and 2029 means competition to attract and retain students will be higher than ever.

Inclusion and belonging efforts are no longer solely the responsibility of Student Affairs. These efforts now begin pre-enrollment and are shared by Enrollment Management leaders. When students have a sense of belonging as a committed, admitted, or prospective student, they are more likely to matriculate and persist.

A recent report by Trellis Company stressed that a focus on the commit-to-start rates for incoming students could be key. Schools that help “committed” students feel a greater sense of belonging before setting foot on campus can reduce summer melt and give more students the tools and confidence to start.

CSUN’s use of Nearpeer amongst only a small cohort of this population resulted in hundreds of additional first-year students and a multi-million dollar revenue impact. Humane technologies, such as Nearpeer, that help students feel increased belonging before arriving ensure colleges reap the benefits of the investments in student orientations, preview days, information sessions, campus-to-prospect communications, and other marketing and enrollment efforts.

Similarly, the focus once students arrive is equally valuable: Retention initiatives for first-year students will “ensure that students and their tuition dollars remain on campus through graduation.” And, as the “Tinto Model of Retention” asserts: “Students who feel they belong and matter [will] increase students’ commitment to an institution and fosters their motivation to persist.”

Improving inclusion and belonging through investments in relationship-centered technologies are key to growing enrollment and retention, and the CSUN trial findings make that markedly clear.



California State University, Northridge
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330

Phone: (818) 677-1200

www.csun.edu



Nearpeer, Inc.
63 Federal Street,
Portland, ME 04101

Phone: (207) 615-0414

nearpeer.com
belonging@nearpeer.com