Aligning Institutional Support for Student Success:

Case Studies of Sophomore-Year Initiatives

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Case 7

University of California San Diego: 2Excel and 2Connect Programs

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The Institution and Its Students

Founded in 1960, the University of California San Diego (UCSD) is a student-centered, research-intensive, service-oriented public institution recognized as one of the top 15 research universities worldwide (University of California Admissions, n.d.). UCSD is one of nine public UC colleges and operates on a quarter system. In 2016-2017, undergraduates comprised 28,127 of 35,816 total students. First-time, first-year enrollment was 5,746 (Office of Student Research & Information, 2016-2017). At UCSD, first-year standing is considered 0 to 44 units completed, and sophomore standing is 45 to 89 units completed (Financial Aid and Scholarship Office, 2017). The 2Excel program exclusively serves sophomores, defined as students in their second year of college who came into college as first-year students or who are in 45-89.9 unit standing.

The Sophomore Initiative

In 2012, concerned about increased dropout rates from the second to the third year among African American and Chicano/a – Latino/a students, the vice chancellor of student affairs commissioned focus groups to look into the challenges and issues facing these student groups. Students were recruited via email and personal contact with staff in the Center for Student Involvement, the Cross Cultural Center, the Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services (OASIS), and Deans of Student Affairs offices in various colleges. Ten one-hour focus groups were conducted with 62 student participants. Of those groups, eight focused on retention issues for third-year students (C. Davalos, personal communication, June 23, 2012). The data from these groups were analyzed to identify common challenges (Cervantes, Davalos, & Velasquez, 2012).

Given the data that arose in these focus groups, the director of OASIS, the oldest learning center at UCSD, which primarily serves first-generation, historically underrepresented, and underserved students, was interested in taking a closer look into the experience of students in these populations and gaining insight about challenges second-year students might experience specifically. As a result, in Spring 2013, individual interviews were conducted with nine third- and fourth-year students about their needs in the sophomore year (Lucas & Kong, 2013). Findings from the individual interviews echoed and aligned with the larger focus group study. Major themes and challenges include the following:

- Academic challenges
  - Classes becoming more rigorous (transitioning from lower- to upper-division courses)
  - Academic support
  - Stress and frustration with academic performance

- Family and home
  - Family pressure
  - Being first-generation
  - Homesickness

- Psychosocial well-being
  - Social connections
  - Doubts or reservations about academic investment at UCSD
  - Lack of validation
  - Asking or knowing where to ask for support

- Navigating the system and getting guidance for the future
  - Worried about a lack of guidance for the future (e.g., graduate school, career)
  - Finding dependable resources of support

- Skills development
  - Lack of time management, organization, prioritizing, and budgeting skills
  - Not connecting with faculty or staff

The 2Excel program was piloted in the 2013-2014 academic year with a cohort of 20 students to address the retention gaps for African American and Chicano/a – Latino/a students and the challenges emerging from the focus group and interview studies. In the 2018-2019 academic year, 170 students comprised the 2Excel cohort. The program aligns with institutional efforts to increase retention and academic success for students, specifically those who are first-generation,[1] historically underrepresented,[2] and low-income as defined by Housing and Community Development Services of San Diego County (2018).

Program Implementation and Development

The 2Excel program was created with three major points of intervention: (a) peer mentorship, (b) a two-unit pass/no pass second-year learning community seminar, and (c) workshop opportunities. Peer mentors are upper-class students (third year and above) who go through a rigorous training process before they become eligible to apply for a 2Excel mentorship position. Peer mentors must enroll in a four-unit course that focuses on research and theory on college student success, student development, and effective strategies to facilitate college student learning. They must also participate in a peer mentorship practicum, where they learn individual counseling and group facilitation skills within a diverse context. 2Excel students are then matched with a peer mentor in a similar major or discipline who meets with them at least three times per quarter during the entirety of their second year. Peer mentors have a student case load of 10 to 12 students.

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[1] UC San Diego defines first-generation college students as those with neither parent having a four-year college degree (Student Retention & Success, 2019).

[2] *Underrepresented* refers to racial and ethnic populations that are disproportionally represented in higher education. *Historically* means this is a 10-year or longer trend at a given school (Sierra College, n.d.).

During the winter quarter, 2Excel program participants are expected to enroll in Education Studies (EDS) 23, Success and Satisfaction in the Second Year of Higher Education: Research Trends and Conclusions, a two-unit course. During the 10-week seminar, students learn about campus resources and high-impact practices and use weekly reflections to develop and articulate plans that will help put into practice what is being learned in class. One of the most impactful outcomes of the seminar is the community building that occurs, cementing the cohort feeling. Through the small-group discussions, validation and normalization of second-year challenges encourage students to build a learning community.

Since 2016, we have also required 2Excel students to attend at least two workshops per quarter. The Second-Year Experience Workshop Series presents a series of sequentially organized activities focused on a range of topics including time management, stress management, financial management, résumé development, and goal setting, to name a few. Workshops are developed to help tackle different second-year challenges and expose students to resources and opportunities critical for their second year. Students have an opportunity to reflect on how workshops helped them achieve their goals during their second year or work toward future goals on Workshop Reflection Sheets due at the end of each quarter.

Other important ways the program provides students with holistic support is the close collaboration staff maintain with the various College Deans of Advising, Residential Life, CARE at the Sexual Assault Resource Center, Counseling and Psychological Services, and the Basic Needs Office, to name a few. We invite these offices to help in our mentor training and work closely with many of them to provide better wrap-around support, especially with students of high need. Staff also regularly refer students to these campus partners.

2Excel also provides high-touch services by identifying students in academic difficulty (i.e., on academic probation or at risk for probation due lack of satisfactory progress) at the beginning of every quarter and facilitating a workshop in which tools and resources are shared. If students cannot attend the workshop, they meet with the program coordinator individually.

2Excel students are eligible for priority enrollment into OASIS tutoring services. We also work closely with Math and Science Tutoring Services to supplement individual tutoring for students requesting additional support. Students who complete all of the mandatory activities in the 2Excel program (i.e., mentoring, EDS 23 seminar, and workshop requirements) receive priority campus enrollment into courses. This is a great benefit to students, especially as some majors, particularly in the STEM fields, have high-demand courses.

Program Evolution: 2Connect Program and Becoming Second-Year Experience

While the 2Excel program was growing in success, UCSD's undergraduate student body saw increasing changes. From 2012 to 2016, the population of first-time students who were first-generation or historically underrepresented grew exponentially. To provide increased, comprehensive support for underserved and underrepresented second-year students, the 2Excel program, the Chancellor's Scholars Program, and the Student Success Coaching Program sought to maximize program collaboration and shared resources. In the 2017-2018 academic year, 2Connect, an effort to expand 2Excel services in a scalable way, was launched as a pilot program. The 2Connect program included a Second-Year Experience Newsletter, Second-Year Experience Workshop Series, and a Second-Year Experience Podcast Series that features student leaders and professional staff "specialists" discussing second-year topics and challenges. In addition, 2Connect students were able to schedule drop-in peer mentorship with 2Excel mentors. While the 2Excel program is only for students entering UCSD as first-time, first-year students, 2Connect is open to transfer students who are second-year students, albeit this is a smaller population of students in the program.

Assessment

We use a variety of assessment tools to determine the success of each of the components of our program, including peer mentoring, workshops, winter quarter seminar, and an overall program assessment.

Students evaluate our peer mentors at the end of every quarter. The survey consists of 10 questions measuring the effectiveness of the mentoring meetings, including referral to resources, and personal and academic support with response choices ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree.*

We also evaluate the EDS 23 seminar by conducting pre- and post-surveys for the course. The 17-question survey assesses changes in students' awareness of campus resources, support, sense of belonging, and overall feeling of success at UCSD.

For our workshops, students complete a survey at the end of the workshop and submit a reflection for each at the end of the quarter. The surveys give us immediate feedback to make changes for future workshops, and the reflections help us understand what specifically is helpful for students when working toward their goals.

At the very end of the academic year, students participate in an end-of-year survey. The 17-question survey measures how impactful our practices were, with response options ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, and asks students what improvements we can make for the following cohort.

Aside from surveys and reflections, the program staff reviews students' quarterly GPAs, academic standing, and retention status. We then evaluate the data to determine which students we need to meet with to discuss academic challenges, invite to attend the Regaining Academic Success Workshop, or provide additional support and refer to resources.

Findings

We have succeeded in addressing most of the challenges our students face, as reflected in the positive feedback of our programming and peer mentoring surveys; the increase in knowledge and sense of belonging from the winter seminar; and increases in GPA, the number of students in good academic standing, and retention rates from the sophomore to junior year.

The most impactful interventions in students' academic challenges have been the peer mentoring and EDS seminar. According to the peer mentoring surveys, more than 96% of students agreed that "my 2Excel mentor recommended academic study tips and strategies based on my skills, needs, and challenges." Our mentors make a huge impact in helping students access resources and make decisions about their academic needs and challenges, especially because they share similar majors.

The importance of the peer mentoring component of the program has also come up in multiple assessments from students. The data in the program development show students need more personal support and mentorship to create social connections and receive guidance from others who understand their struggles, which is why the mentoring component is so beneficial. In the quarterly mentor surveys, more than 99% of students agreed that "My 2Excel mentor created a comfortable space and environment for me to discuss personal issues," and more than 95% said that "My 2Excel mentor encouraged my personal growth and development." Our mentoring program is effective in creating a safe space for students to receive validation and feel comfortable asking for and receiving help. More than 94% of students in the mentoring survey agreed that "The support provided by my 2Excel mentor improved my adjustment to UCSD." Adjustment might have been supported by having access to campus resources: All the students surveyed agreed that "My 2Excel mentor shared information about campus resources/services with me."

Our goal is for students to have a meaningful and holistic experience at UCSD where their personal well-being is as important as their academics. The EDS seminar accomplishes this by addressing both personal and academic challenges. Most students served are first-generation and feel pressure to excel in school while also feeling homesick. The EDS seminar is instrumental in the psychosocial well-being of students, as it creates a community with which to connect over similar challenges and share support and resources. In the seminar post-survey, more than 90% agreed that the "2Excel seminar had a positive impact on my adjustment/sense of belonging at UCSD," and more than 87% "know where to go if they are facing social or personal challenges." The feedback confirms that community building is important for students to feel a sense of belonging and receive support on campus, all of which contribute to their retention. One student commented on the survey: "I really loved being in seminar because it was like my safe space ... it felt like I belonged." Further, more than

87% agreed or strongly agreed that "my interactions with other students have had a positive impact on my personal growth, attitudes, and values." The seminar is an opportunity not only for learning but for creating a community with other students from similar backgrounds, thus building a larger network of support.

The EDS seminar has also been useful in responding to academic challenges. In the post-survey, more than 87% agreed with the statement, "I know where to go if I have a question about academics." More than 87% "feel comfortable seeking academic advising."

Another challenge students face is planning for their future and finding resources to meet their career goals. Since most students are first-generation, we include programming on career goals as part of the EDS seminar. Whether it be reflections on their goals after graduation, or learning about campus resources, our students are given multiple opportunities to plan for their future. In the EDS post-seminar survey, 100% of students agreed that they know where to go if they "have a question about study abroad," more than 81% know where to go if they "have a question about Academic Enrichment Programs," and more than 78% "know more about their desired career goal." The EDS seminar gives students a structured time to reflect on future plans with resources available, thus alleviating some stress and providing opportunities to work toward their goals.

The seminar also focuses on skill development, helping students learn academic and personal skills by connecting them to resources. In the post-seminar survey, more than 92% agreed they are more knowledgeable about resources thanks to the 2Excel seminar. One student commented, "The 2Excel seminar was fantastic. I learned about various resources across campus and was able to talk to the speakers." With structured time to learn how to develop their skills and use resources, students are more likely to implement these skills in their academic and personal lives, which leads to better overall academic performance and retention.

Workshops also offer a great opportunity for students to further develop time management, organization, and budgeting skills. In Fall 2018, we hosted two workshops on time management and studying abroad. In the feedback surveys, more than 81% of the participants agreed they found the workshop applicable toward their goals. Almost all students (94%) indicated they were more likely to follow up on campus resources after the presentation.

The success of these interventions is evident in the retention rate of the 2016-2017 cohort, which was 97.5% compared with 94.2% for all sophomores at UCSD that academic year. 2Excel students' average GPA rose steadily over the course of the year, from 2.86 in Fall 2017 quarter to 2.90 in Winter 2018 quarter, and 2.98 in Spring 2018 quarter. This increase is also reflected in the growth of students in good academic standing (2.0 or higher GPA) throughout their sophomore year. In Winter 2018, 89.6% of 2Excel students were in good academic standing. By Spring 2018, this figure had risen to 95.7%. The interventions and the students' use of resources in the program have significantly impacted their overall GPA and academic standing in the sophomore year.

Alignment for Student Success

The Second-Year Experience programs build on the first college year objectives in two major areas: increased retention from second to third year; and academic success of first-generation, historically underrepresented, and under-resourced or low-income students (i.e., Pell-eligible students or those coming from the lowest-performing high schools). The 2Excel program has intentional recruiting and collaboration with the Summer Bridge Program (also a program in OASIS), which has more than 40 years of success serving first-generation, historically underrepresented and underserved students. The 2Excel program is committed to being an internal pipeline for OASIS students. Through the EDS 23 seminar, students are encouraged to make action plans for their third and fourth years at UCSD, hence increasing engagement into high-impact practices (e.g., study abroad, internships, undergraduate research). As a result, we see students from the 2Excel program having completed more units and earning higher GPAs than nonparticipants with similar academic preparation.

Currently, we are gathering data and coordinating focus groups to gain insight into the success of our 2Connect pilot year as well as the evolution of Second-Year Experience programs. As we look forward, we hope to institutionalize many more developments within the Second-Year Experience. We are working to pilot a living-learning community program, which will allow for a more comprehensive student experience

by linking the EDS 23 seminar to a residential community. We are also looking to expand our mentoring program to include our OASIS alumni community, of which there are more than 40 years of passionate and accomplished individuals. As an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution, the UCSD campus is evolving, and the Second-Year Experience will work to continue to keep a pulse on changing student population needs and institutional gaps that need to be filled to continue student retention and success.

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