

Supporting college students through peer mentoring: Serving immigrant students

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Abstract

Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU Denver) Immigrant Services program enlists the support of peer mentors to provide holistic support to the institution's immigrant, refugee, and English Language Learner (ELL) populations. These peer mentors are highly specialized in their student employee role and are trained to provide academic and personal support. Peer mentors support students with such issues as English writing support, scholarship applications, and connection to immigration resources. The Immigrant Services program at MSU Denver could not function without this student employment position. The Student Academic Success Center at the Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU Denver) hosts a variety of programs that support students in persisting through college. These programs scale from supporting the student population at-large to targeting specific populations that have been identified to need specialized support. The Immigrant Services Program provides support to a specific population of students at MSU Denver that includes immigrants, refugees, undocumented and Deferred Action Childhood Arrival (DACA) students, and English Language Learners (ELL). Highly trained peer mentors work with students individually and as a group to support their transition to college and onward through graduation.

Keywords

Refugee, DACA students, English language learners, support center

Background

Metropolitan State University of Denver shares the Auraria Campus in the heart of downtown Denver, Colorado. Two other institutions, the University of Colorado Denver, and the Community College of Denver, share this space and a select number of its resources. While this campus serves approximately 45,000 students, 20,000 attend MSU Denver specifically. The institution is a modified open-enrollment school guaranteeing admission to students over the age of 20 with a high school diploma or GED equivalent. MSU Denver (2016) is the most racially and ethnically diverse four-year institution in the state of Colorado. Over 90% of the students served here are in-state students, with a majority coming from the Denver metropolitan area.

MSU Denver started in 1965, and a key piece of the MSU Denver (2016) mission states that the institution provides access to education. As the institution continued to grow and serve the needs of the Denver and Colorado communities, many students from immigrant and refugee programs enrolled in college, earning access to education that many thought would never be afforded to them. To better serve these students, the Immigrant Services Program was created

in 1980. For the first 30 years of the program, Patti Lohman, an instructor in the English department teaching English as a Second Language, started the program to specifically help students with English Language Learner needs. For the next three decades she would lead the program. The program served approximately 60-80 students each semester, walking students from their admissions process all the way through graduation. This program has located in a number of different departments on campus including, the English department, the Office of Admissions, and finally the Student Academic Success Center where it currently resides.

Immigrant Services is a key piece of the main retention program on campus: the Student Academic Success Center. This center serves all students and provides support through a variety of methods. Tutoring is available to all students and is provided free of charge. The Supplemental Instructions program provides peer leaders to help students in particular courses learn how to be better students. The Scholars Success program supports students receiving a scholarship to succeed in their courses and maintain their scholarship eligibility. The Brother to Brother program supports male students of color on campus through leadership, social engagement, academic support, and community involvement. The Fostering Success program provides comprehensive supports, similar to Immigrant Services, but does so for emancipated foster youth. The International Student Support initiative works with students on campus with F1 and J1 Visas. Finally, the Transfer Student Success provides support and community for the transfer student population on campus, which is typically 65% of all MSU Denver students.

All of the aforementioned programs work congruently to retain MSU Denver students and help them persist through graduation. This organizational structure allows the students in the Immigrant Services program easy and direct access to these programs such as transfer course credit approval or joining the Brother to Brother program. The target goal of these programs is to retain 80% of students. This structure allows the sharing of financial and staff resources under one center. For example, staff within the Student Academic Success Center have their specialties, but are cross-trained to assist students in other programs when those program staff are away or otherwise occupied. Student staff can be shared as well. For example, sometimes tutors are able to come from the tutoring center and share their expertise with students in the Immigrant Services program. Because this is all within one center, there is no adverse effect to program budgets or resources. Also, on a budgetary theme, being part of a larger center allows for budgeting flexibility within the center to allocate financial resources to the program as needed instead of a defined, fixed budget.

The Student Academic Success Center reports to the Associate Vice President of Undergraduate Studies, who oversees non-academic units. Other offices in this reporting line includes the Career Center, Access Center (serving students with disabilities), the Center for Applied Learning (internships and service learning), International Studies, First Year Success, Academic Advising, and the Center for Individualized Learning (Individualized Degree Programs). Again, this reporting line assists with access to services for students in the program.

Immigrant services program at MSU Denver

Immigrant Services serves over 300 immigrant, refugee, undocumented, Deferred Action Childhood Arrival (DACA) students, and ELL students. The purpose of this program is to

provide the special and individualized support that traditional support programs, such as tutoring, a writing center, and academic advising, cannot support. This support is provided by a well-trained staff that include two professional staff members and usually three to five peer mentors.

The unique needs of these students include support in navigating MSU Denver's admissions criteria. Admission is guaranteed for twenty-plus year old students with a GED or high school diploma. Some students in this program may need support in passing Accuplacer exams in English and Math that prove they are college ready before they can take college-level coursework. Immigrant Services provides tutoring assistance to prepare for these exams through the peer tutors in the tutoring center.

Once admitted, and placed into college level course work, this population of students need support in navigating a number of administrative processes that can become more complex due to undocumented, immigrant, or refugee status. For example, prior to 2012, MSU Denver considered undocumented students to be out-of-state students and required them to pay out-of-state tuition rates. However, since then, MSU Denver created a special tuition classification for undocumented students that lived in Colorado. In 2013, the Colorado legislature passed the Asset Bill, granting in-state tuition to undocumented students that graduated from a Colorado High School and had attended three years prior to graduation (Cotton, 2013). The Immigrant Services program helps students apply for this special tuition designation.

Paying for school as an immigrant, refugee, or undocumented student can be daunting. These students typically need support in filling out the FAFSA and getting the required documentation. In addition, undocumented students are not eligible for federal financial aid, and many students at MSU Denver fear filling out the FAFSA, due to their immigration status. To help alleviate this, MSU Denver created the Dreamer Application for Institutional Aid (DAIA). This allows students to apply and receive institutional and state aid that is available to them without requiring the FAFSA. Also, Immigrant Services helps students to apply for a number of private scholarships that are also available locally and nationally. Recently, the Student Academic Success Center at MSU Denver has partnered with University Advancement to raise scholarship funds for these students. Financial issues is one of the top reasons students at MSU Denver do not persist to graduation. For students in this immigrant services program, this is often magnified by the limited resources available to them as a result of their immigration status. Through alternative methods of funding, MSU Denver is able to help support many of these students financially, improving their educational attainment.

As these students matriculate through college there are many academic support needs that are critical to their success. Support is provided for English Language Learners by Immigrant Services. To serve these students one-on-one and correct common ELL writing errors require staff that is specifically trained. In addition, these students are connected to a network of , who assist them individually with difficult course work including, but not limited to, Math, Science, Engineering, Business, Social Sciences, Communication and Arts and Humanities.

Finally, MSU Denver has found that this student population, like most, needs social engagement and a sense of belonging. MSU Denver's Immigrant Services program provides

activities and spaces for this to happen. In fact, these students have a designated “safe” study space within the Student Academic Success Center to study and congregate. Furthermore, Immigrant Services also leads and supports programming to confront social and political issues, such as immigration reform, DACA rights, and state-issued drivers’ licenses for undocumented people.

In the past two years, MSU Denver has committed additional support, including financial and human resource, to help enlarge the Immigrant Services program from serving 80 students to over 300 and growing. Professional program staff include a full-time coordinator and a full-time specialist. The coordinator has a Master’s degree in Linguistics and provides direct tutoring to students, in addition to academic and personal advocacy. The coordinator supervises a full-time specialist who is considered more of a student-affairs generalist. The person in this position meets with students, plans events and programs, assists students with registration, connects with campus and community resources, and helps identify financial support. To support the professional staff, the coordinator hires, trains, and supervises a staff of five peer mentors.

While the professional staff of Immigrant Services are critical to serving this student population, it is also true that MSU Denver could not serve over 300 students without hiring a well-trained, capable peer mentor staff. The Student Academic Success Center as a whole is dependent on a student staff of around 150, when counting tutors, supplemental instructors, front desk representatives, and peer mentors. Immigrant Services is one of many programs that use student peer mentors to provide direct services to students. Brother to Brother, Scholars Success, and Transfer Services also follow a similar model. Student staff are an extremely cost effective way to serve students on increasingly tighter budgets at institutions. Some staff are hired with funds from financial aid work study programs available, while others are paid out of the Student Academic Success Center program budget. This money is supported directly from tuition and dispersed through the Division of Academic and Student Affairs. This is not a program supported by student fees.

The Immigrant Services program at MSU Denver works to recruit of student staff that reflect the population it serves. For example, the program hires students who are here under the previously mentioned Asset tuition bill. Some students are under DACA status or are naturalized immigrant or refugees. The staff of the SASC emphasizes hiring of peer mentors that can, to some extent, empathize with the students they are serving. Having gone through similar processes at the school themselves, these students are in a position to provide detailed and accurate information. Also, students are recruited from the English linguistics department, as they are uniquely skilled to peer-tutor on the ELL needs of the student population, with support from the program coordinator.

Once a student is hired as a peer mentor they are trained in specifically supporting the needs of the immigrant, refugee, undocumented, DACA, and ELL students they serve. This includes understanding different immigration and refugee status as it pertains to state and national residency. Training covers focuses specifically on academic difficulties encountered by these students, specifically writing. Also, the Counseling Center on Campus provides a campus-wide peer mentor training at the beginning of the year. The coordinator of the program provides

ongoing supervision and feedback for the students to be successful and improve on their service to students.

Lessons learned

Immigrant Services is a successful and growing program at MSU Denver because of the organizational structure of expert professional staff, combined with dedicated well-trained peer mentors. It is critically important for this specific program to have a coordinator who understands English Language Learner needs, but also the ability to act as a student affairs generalist, while keeping informed on local, state, and national issues that have an impact on this student population. Equally important, it is important to have a student staff that can connect with students, share common experiences, and build a community of learners.

Consistently over the past several years, Immigrant Services boasted a fall to fall semester retention rate between 80-90%, even while tripling the number of students served. The most recent fall to fall semester retention rate from the 2015 group of students served was 83.9%. Comparatively, MSU Denver's fall to fall semester retention rate typically falls between 65-70%. How does Immigrant Services help their students out-perform the student population at-large, while knowing this to be typically a more at-risk student population? The commitment of staff resources to provide direct, intentional, and effective services helps this population find success at this institution. Students have access to staff regularly, whether it is their peer mentor or one of the professional staff members. Most importantly, the institution from senior leadership on down has a stated commitment to serving these students and providing access to education for all.

Peer mentoring works at MSU Denver in the Immigrant Services program due to a number of factors. One important factor is strong leadership from the program coordinator. The coordinator and specialist are experts in serving this population of students and their needs. Mentoring also works because the peer mentors have clearly defined roles. They each have a case load of students whom they are asked to provide outreach and support. They are trained on the how-to of handling some of the unique situations that arise when working with students. However, peer mentors are not asked to provide support for which they are not trained, or services that which could be considered an inappropriate level of work to ask from a paraprofessional.

Students hired to be peer mentors also must possess the maturity to handle information of a sensitive nature. This is especially true when talking with students about their own or family immigration students. Many undocumented students live in fear that they, or members of their family, will be deported. Furthermore, peer mentors have access to other sensitive information, such as student grades and financial information. MSU Denver therefore requires student workers to sign confidentiality agreements and acknowledge they will take precautions to protect students FERPA rights. MSU Denver trusts the Immigrant Services peer mentor staff with this information, as it is critical to help the students assigned to them. A peer mentor must know if a student needs additional financial resources, or additional support in their classes. Students hired for this position are given a high level of responsibility and trust.

Furthermore, at MSU Denver, peer mentors are given opportunities to maximize their strengths and talents as student workers. For example, currently within Immigrant Services, one peer mentor is earning her degree in Linguistics. She is ideally suited to work with students in need of ELL support on their writing and speech assignment. Another peer mentor is an excellent event planner and provides opportunities for social engagement as well as events that give students a forum to discuss issues pertinent to them. All Immigrant Services peer mentors excel at providing academic support and advocacy, helping students create study plans to succeed in their courses.

This program is replicable on institutions that have a large immigrant, refugee, undocumented, DACA and ELL student populations. Budget considerations must include the ability to pay full time salaries for at least one coordinator position, and to pay student staff at an hourly rate commensurate with peer mentors, tutors, etc., in similar programs on campus. Additional professional staff positions can be considered according to size of population served. When possible, efforts should be made to work with the Office of Financial Aid to help students receive work-study employment. This will help them to manage budget expenditures, especially when the program is combined with other programs within a center.

Beyond budget and staff support, another important consideration is space. This is another resource that is often competitively sought. From an equity perspective, MSU Denver works to make available spaces specific to students that may be considered vulnerable or at-risk. This can be difficult to navigate, especially as people look for spaces available for all students or question why a particular group is given a specific space. From an equity lens, MSU Denver provides a space for our Immigrant students, as there are many places for these students that do not feel safe or welcoming. Furthermore, peer mentors also need space to work, and privacy to hold personal conversations with students. It can be very difficult to get a student to open up about their immigration status or finances in an open area. MSU Denver works to create work environments where one on one conversations can take place confidentially.

Supporting immigrant students, especially those that may have an undocumented immigration status can be controversial for some. In setting up this program one must be prepared for criticism in serving this population of students. Some will not see the benefit of educating some of these students, and will call into question the appropriateness especially at state-supported schools. At MSU Denver, these students are viewed as a vital part of the Denver community, and serving these students meets MSU Denver's mission of providing educational access to the city of Denver and surrounding cities and counties.

MSU Denver is committed to serving this population of students, now and into the future. The past few years of the program have seen growth in number of professional support staff from one to two, number of peer mentors from one to five, and number of students supported from eighty to over three hundred. Continued growth of this program is expected, especially considering that this is a growing population in the Denver Metro area (Denver Public Schools, 2015). While serving these students and encouraging their educational attainment is important, institutions must also acknowledge that state and federal laws and decisions have an impact on students' desire and ability to complete school. Therefore, program leadership must continue to have strong ties to community and awareness of how public policy affects the students served

here. In the future, it will also be important to consider resources and money that can directly support students such as grants and scholarships. Relationships with university fundraisers and donors alike are a key piece to raising funds that students can use to complete their education.

As the program continues to grow and expand, peer mentors will be a vital part of supporting an increasing number of students. The Student Academic Success Center will need to consider increasing budgetary support for hourly student workers. While this may affect budgetary support from other programs, it is important to continue the support and expansion of a program that consistently retains and graduates students at a rate that is above the institutional average.

Conclusion

Peer mentoring is a critical component of the educational experience at MSU Denver for many students involved in academic support programs, but especially those served by the Immigrant Services program. When implemented with a clear structure of training, duties, and understanding of student skill level, these programs can be highly successful in helping specific student populations persist year to year and continue to graduation. Hiring qualified students for these roles is necessary. If peer mentors also reflect the population served, it can be a value added bonus in practicing empathy. Peer mentoring also supports the notion that institution must find fiscally responsible ways to serve students. In times of budget constraints, hiring, training, and supervising student staff, can be an alternative to adding professional staff as long as work responsibilities are monitored appropriately. Peer mentoring is a valuable student support model and will be a key piece of supporting students at MSU Denver now and in the future.

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