

SIUE Cougars Connectors Program Positively Impacts First-Year Students

by Megan Wieser
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EDWARDSVILLE – As the COVID-19 pandemic threatened college students' first-year experience, students, faculty and staff at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville sprang into action and devised a creative plan to provide new students with a support system centered on near-peer mentoring.

The Cougar Connectors program, inspired by the Honors Student Association (HSA) peer-to-peer mentoring program, quickly developed into a robust and effective offering. During the program's launch in fall 2020, 150 upper-class students volunteered to provide help and guidance to 1,500 first-year students (FYS).

“Ultimately, our aim was to provide a substitute for the kinds of natural relationships through hallway and classroom interactions that would develop between first-year students and upper-class students,” explained Carpentersville native Colin Boysen, a senior business administration major and HSA president. “This kind of program is especially valuable and important during these trying times. Although, it has exceptional benefits even in normal times.”

University Honors Program Director Eric Ruckh, PhD, associate professor in the Department of History, challenged Boysen to lead the charge on developing such an initiative that would be student-led and student-serving. Boysen had just two months to scale the HSA peer-to-peer mentoring program from a support system impacting 100 students to one that would serve 1,500 FYS.

“I challenged Colin, because I’ve had the great privilege of working with him and other wonderful students in the HSA,” Ruckh said. “I knew that Colin and the people around him would be able to create this program. I knew they wanted to help the institution, and if given the opportunity, they would not disappoint.”

To assist in guiding the student-side delivery of the program, Boysen convened a steering committee comprising upper-class students Ronald Akpan, Jacob Beebe, Leslie Kupferle and Minerva Mixon. Committee members collaborated to develop and administer the program.

Core aspects of program development included building content for volunteers and messaging to participants, coordinating with the First Semester Transitions (FST) program to build on its successful foundation, and recruiting 150 upper-class volunteer mentors.

Speaking to the grand challenge of producing a successful large-scale program on a short timeline, Boysen said, “This wasn’t just a charge from Eric. It was the Manhattan

Project of mentorship. We had to remain constantly flexible with this program. Cougar Connectors demonstrated that SIUE has a dedicated student population that wants to help.”

Ruckh, Boysen, Honors Program Assistant Director Ian Toberman, and two volunteer mentors presented the Cougar Connectors program to the SIU System Board of Trustees (BOT) at its Feb. 11 meeting.

Sophomore nursing major Alexia Burnett, of Shelbyville, served as a mentor and was paired with 10 students. She primarily used GroupMe to stay in constant contact with her mentees.

“It was rewarding to share my personal experiences and provide students with helpful information,” she said. “I loved getting to know these freshmen and helping them succeed. I answered questions about how to study for the nursing entry exam, how to use Blackboard, how to email a professor professionally and how to get involved on campus.”

Fellow mentor and nursing major Marcus Kwasa, of Edwardsville, found email was the most effective form of communication for his group. In spring 2021, he is again participating in Cougar Connectors, this time as an “on call connector” who faculty teaching FST courses can contact if they feel a student would benefit from added guidance and help.

At the BOT meeting, the program received high praise from trustee Dr. Ed Hightower and system leaders.

“It’s exciting to use this type of program for supporting, energizing and providing freshman students the confidence they need during their difficult first year,” Hightower noted. “I’m always concerned about freshmen, as are other trustees. How are we not only recruiting, but more importantly, supporting and building their confidence?”

“This program is an amazing personification of empathy and altruism,” added SIU System Vice President for Academic Innovation, Planning and Partnerships Gireesh Gupchup, PhD. “Programs like this build culture.”

In spring 2021, Kwasa is leading a group with goals to re-evaluate and develop the curriculum of the Cougar Connectors program. The group will use participant feedback and mentor experiences to lead improvements. The program’s new curriculum will avoid duplication and complement FST content.

Toberman underscored that it was students who gave Cougar Connectors life and made it soar.

“We had 1,500 first-year students who refused to let COVID change their college plans,” Toberman explained. “But, we knew that part of the campus experience that makes SIUE feel special was threatened by the pandemic. We are proud to have presented Cougar Connectors as our response. Colin, Lexi and Marcus are just three of the 150 student volunteers who signed up for an idea, and made it into a program. Students yearning for a chance to lead came together with a shared identity and purpose.”

Cougar Connectors is a valuable contribution to SIUE that will go beyond the pandemic and help improve the first-year experience. And, students led the way.

“University professors and teachers always have an opportunity to learn from students,” Ruckh concluded. “It is deeply embedded in my experience as a professor and as an academic. They’re the ones who will renew the future of the world. They’re the ones who will renew the future of institutions like SIUE and the SIU System.”

Ruckh has plans to make the innovate program visible by promoting its success and sustainability at national conferences.

To view the Cougar Connectors presentation to the SIU System BOT, visit siusystem.edu/board-of-trustees/meetings/meetings2021 . Click on the YouTube link and scroll to the 1:45 mark in the recording.

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