

# Thriving Together: Peer Support Networks that Embrace Intersectionality

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# Necessary Definitions:



DATA-INFORMED  
PRACTICES



PEER SUPPORT



THRIVING



COMMUNITY

# Data-Informed Practices in Higher Education

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Data-informed practices in higher education leverage data alongside professional insight to guide decisions, improving student outcomes, resource allocation, and institutional effectiveness.

# Peer Support in Higher Education

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Peer support in higher education is the encouragement, guidance, and mentorship students provide to one another, fostering academic growth, emotional well-being, and a sense of belonging within the campus community.

# Community in Higher Education

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Community in higher education is a shared sense of belonging, support, and collective purpose among students, faculty, and staff, fostering an inclusive and connected campus environment.

# Thriving in Higher Education

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Thriving in higher education is a state where students experience holistic well-being, engagement, and growth, achieving academic success and personal fulfillment within a supportive campus environment.

# Data- Informed Practices

GPA as an Essential,  
YET, limited Metric

# A Case Study: COVID Era Challenges and a Case for Peer Supportive Communities (**Administrative**)

**Digital Divide and Access Issues:** Limited access to technology and stable internet created barriers.

**Financial Pressures:** Economic strains due to job losses and financial insecurity.

**Adaptation to Online Learning:** The shift to online classes posed challenges in accessibility.

**Uncertainty Around Grading and Assessment:** Inconsistent grading policies created stress and uncertainty.

**Career Development and Job Market Anxiety:** Disrupted internships and job market uncertainty added pressure.

**Health Concerns and Family Responsibilities:** Health and family obligations added stress for some, particularly those caring for sick family members.

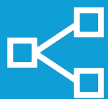
## A Case Study: COVID Era Challenges and a Case for Peer Supportive Communities (**Well-Being**)



**Mental Health Struggles:** Isolation, anxiety, and stress were highly prevalent, making mental health one of the most significant challenges, with increased demand for support services.



**Academic Motivation and Engagement:** Remote learning led to declines in motivation and engagement, with many students struggling to stay connected to their studies.



**Social and Peer Connections:** Loss of campus social interactions impacted students' sense of belonging and well-being, increasing feelings of loneliness.

## Three Guiding Considerations for Building a Thriving Peer Community Essential to Overall Student Success

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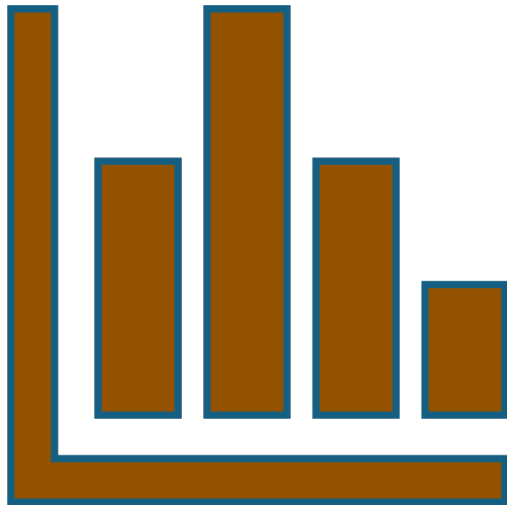
Students are our most valuable support resource.



The principles of first-generation support are useful for all students; therefore, can and should serve as an essential foundation for all programming and interventions.



The student experience is defined by intersecting identities and experiences. The concept of intersectionality allows, for an understanding of how to support one of several backbones of the student experience.

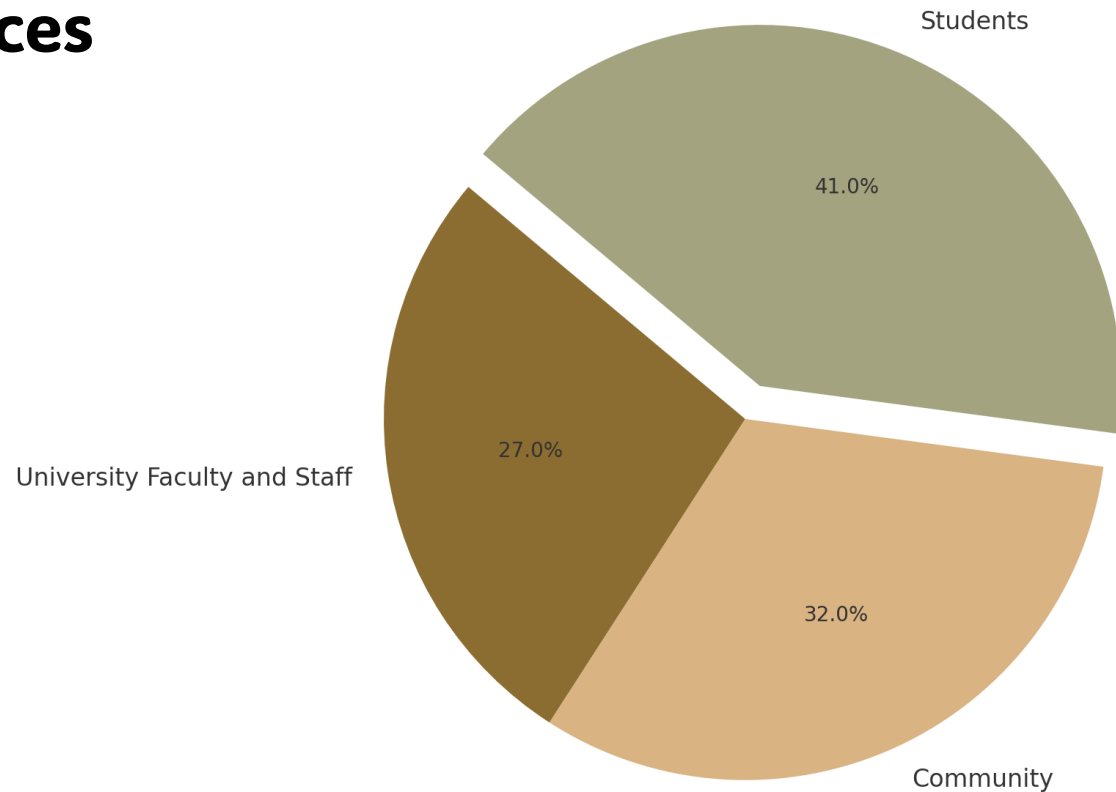


## An Essential Argument for Peer Support

# Who Do Students Consider to be Sources of Interpersonal Difficulties?

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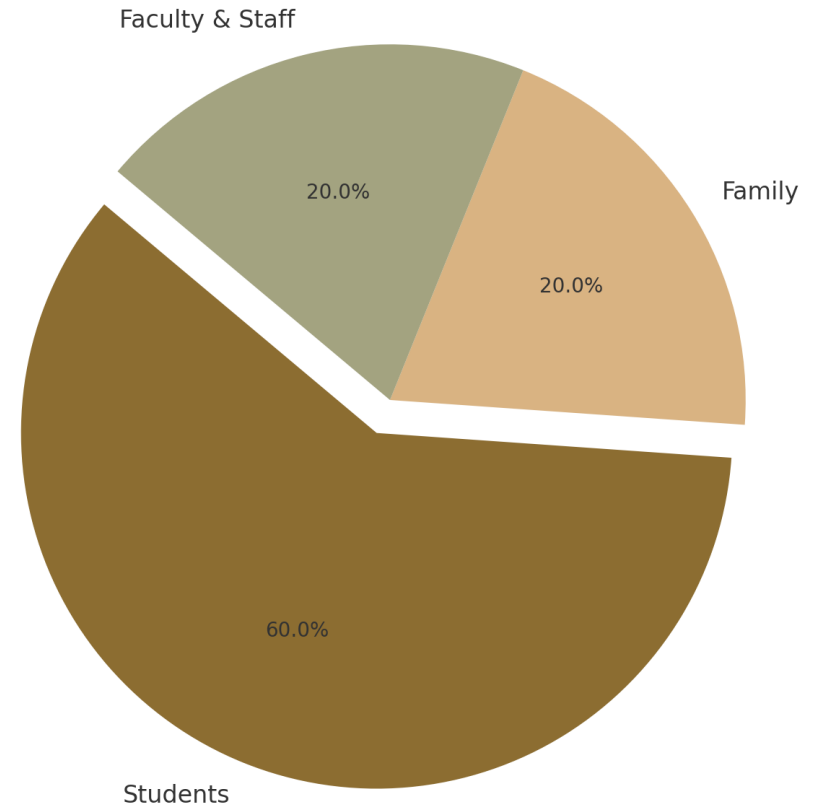
- Other Students
- City
  - City Police
  - Businesses
  - Community Members
  - Church
- Faculty
  - Teaching
  - Administrative
- University Employees



## Who Do Students Turn to for Support?

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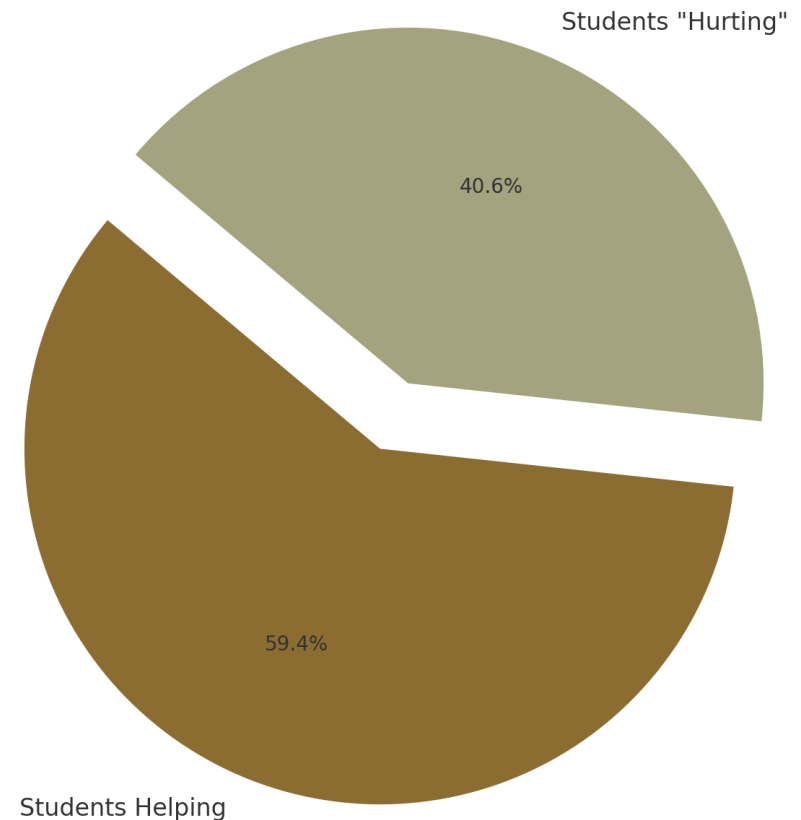
- Family
- Peer Friends
  - Outside of UVA
  - Friend at UVA
  - Student Leaders
- Faculty
  - Teaching
  - Non-Teaching
- Administrators
- Ministers
- CAPS



## Students are a Vital Source of Support- Benefits

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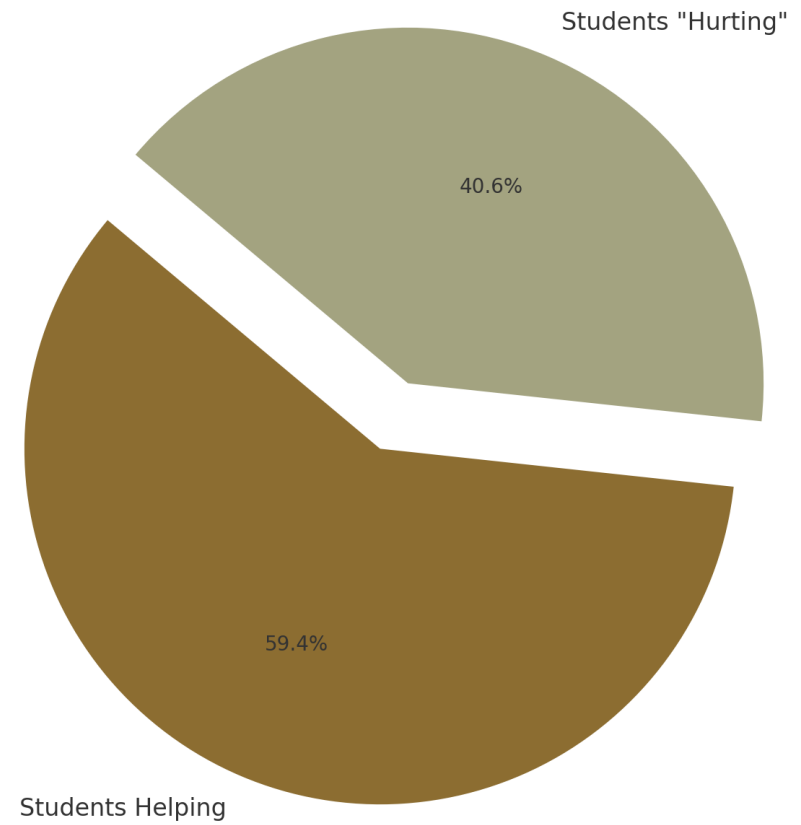
- Peer-to Peer Understanding and Empathy
- Promoting a Sense of Belonging
- Effective Academic Support and Collaboration
- Increasing Accessibility and Reducing Stigma
- Leadership Development and Engagement
- Building Resilience and Confidence



## Students are a Vital Source of Support- Risks

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- Emotional and Mental health Strain
- Lack of Professional Training
- Boundaries and Role Confusion
- Unintended Reinforcement of Biases or Misconceptions
- Inadequate Support for High-Risk Situations
- Impact on Academic Performance



## Key Interventions for Safe and Effective Peer Support

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- **Peer Support Training Programs:** Providing structured training on essential skills like active listening, boundary-setting, confidentiality, and recognizing when to refer to professionals is foundational.
- **Clear Referral Pathways:** Establishing and communicating clear, accessible referral pathways helps students know when and how to connect their peers with professional resources.
- **Regular Supervision and Check-ins:** Consistent check-ins with a supervisor or counselor offer essential support for peer supporters, helping them navigate challenges, avoid burnout, and receive guidance on difficult situations.
- **Emergency Protocol Training:** Ensuring that peer supporters are trained to recognize signs of mental health crises and understand emergency protocols is crucial for managing high-risk situations safely and effectively.

# Everyone benefits from a First Generation-Focused Framework.

# Defining Challenges typically impacting First-Generation Students

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- **Unfamiliarity with College Systems:** Challenges with financial aid, registration, advising, and career planning.
- **Financial Pressures:** Tuition, living expenses, and balancing work with academics.
- **Academic Preparedness:** Gaps in study skills, time management, and confidence.
- **Isolation & Imposter Syndrome:** Feelings of being an outsider or doubting belonging.
- **Family Expectations & Role Strain:** Pressure to succeed, often coupled with family responsibilities.
- **Limited Networking & Social Capital:** Fewer connections to mentors and career networks.
- **Cultural & Identity Conflicts:** Balancing family expectations with campus norms.
- **Mental Health Challenges:** Higher stress and less familiarity with support resources.
- **Lower Confidence:** Hesitation to participate academically and socially.

# Essential Support Strategies for First-Generation Students

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- **Tailored Orientation Programs:** Introduce college processes and available resources.
- **Peer Mentorship:** Connect first-gen students with upperclassmen mentors.
- **Financial Aid Counseling:** Provide clear guidance and emergency funds.
- **Academic Skills Workshops:** Offer sessions on study skills and time management.
- **Community-Building Activities:** Foster connection and belonging among peers.
- **Family Education:** Inform families on how to support their student's success.
- **Career Services & Networking:** Provide targeted career resources and alumni access.
- **Accessible Mental Health Resources:** Offer culturally sensitive counseling and support.
- **Consistent Advising Check-Ins:** Regularly monitor progress and provide guidance.

# Why Integrate First-Generation Support Across Student Affairs?

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- **Promotes Equity and Inclusion:** Ensures fair access to resources.
- **Boosts Retention and Success:** Increases graduation rates and student outcomes.
- **Cultivates Campus Belonging:** Builds a more welcoming, inclusive environment.
- **Equips Staff to Support Diversity:** Trains all staff to meet diverse needs.
- **Enhances Institutional Reputation:** Recognized as a leader in student support.
- **Closes Achievement Gaps:** Improves outcomes for first-gen and underserved students.
- **Builds Resilience and Independence:** Prepares students for post-college success.
- **Supports Data-Informed Practice:** Enables continuous improvement in programming.

# How Student Supporters Help First-Generation Students

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- **Academic Mentorship:** Share study tips and time management strategies.
- **Guidance on College Systems:** Explain financial aid, registration, and advising.
- **Building Community:** Foster belonging and reduce isolation.
- **Connecting to Resources:** Raise awareness of campus support services.
- **Emotional Support:** Provide empathy and boost confidence.
- **Encouraging Campus Involvement:** Promote engagement in clubs and events.
- **Role Modeling:** Share experiences to inspire success.

# **DEI: Data, Evaluation, and Impact**

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# Intersecting Identities vs. Intersectionality

- **Intersecting Identities:** Multiple social identities (e.g., race, gender, class) that form an individual's unique self.
- **Intersectionality:** Framework that examines how these identities interact within social systems, creating overlapping experiences of privilege or discrimination.

*Black College Women (BCW) Leadership, 2023*

# Challenges Faced by Individuals with High Intersectionality

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- **Amplified Discrimination:** Multiple biases intersect, intensifying mistreatment.
- **Isolation and Lack of Representation:** Fewer role models and peers with shared identities.
- **Identity Conflicts:** Navigating conflicting cultural or social expectations.
- **Limited Resources:** Support often tailored to single identities, not intersections.
- **Policy Invisibility:** Single-identity policies overlook unique intersectional needs.
- **Mental Health Strain:** Higher stress from compounded discrimination.
- **Economic Barriers:** Additional hurdles in education and career advancement.

## Challenges for Community Members with High Intersectionality and Expectations for Support (Anchor Communities)

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- **Risk of Burnout:** Balancing personal and community needs is exhausting.
- **Unmet Personal Support:** Own challenges often go unaddressed.
- **Invisible Labor:** Contributions may be undervalued or overlooked.
- **Emotional Toll:** Supporting others can amplify personal pain.
- **High Expectations:** Pressure to be resilient without vulnerability.
- **Barrier to Seeking Help:** Reluctance to admit personal needs.
- **Limited Growth:** Support role limits personal and career advancement.

# Strategies to Support Anchor Communities with High Intersectionality

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- **Mental Health Access:** Provide culturally sensitive support.
- **Boundary & Self-Care Training:** Empower well-being management.
- **Regular Check-Ins:** Offer peer networks and supervision.
- **Formal Recognition:** Acknowledge and value contributions.
- **Normalize Help-Seeking:** Reduce stigma for accessing support.
- **Growth Opportunities:** Offer leadership and development paths.
- **Flexible Workloads:** Allow for breaks and manageable tasks.

# Supporting First-Gen, Peer Supporters, and Anchor Communities

## Emerging Themes in Challenges:

**Balancing Roles and Identities:**  
High stress from managing multiple responsibilities.

**Systemic Barriers:** Limited access to tailored resources and support.

**Isolation and Belonging:** Strong need for community and connection.

## Key Strategies:

**Inclusive Support Structures:**  
Culturally sensitive mental health and accessible resources.

**Empowerment and Recognition:**  
Leadership opportunities and acknowledgment of contributions.

**Community Building:** Peer networks and mentorship to foster belonging and mutual support.

# Wrap Up and Questions

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- **The Complexities of Intersecting Identities:** We considered how multiple marginalized identities intensify challenges and increase the responsibility placed on those who are often the backbone of their communities.
- **Recognizing Shared and Unique Needs:** From navigating college systems to managing emotional strain, each group we discussed faces overlapping challenges. Yet, each also has distinct needs that require tailored support.
- **Empowering and Building Inclusive Support Systems:** Through inclusive resources, leadership opportunities, and community-building efforts, we can better serve the diverse student population and enhance a sense of belonging and resilience across campus.

# Workshop Evaluation

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Thank you!

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