

FACILITATING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS ON CAMPUS

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INTRODUCTION

College is an ideal setting to develop and expand a person's social network. Using strategies that maximize social opportunities centered around shared interests and common experiences can often lead to the development of authentic friendships and increased campus membership.

Educational coaches are in an ideal position to recognize opportunities for social engagement and to support and encourage students to develop social networks and new friendships. Effective coaches believe that friendships are critical to a person's overall well-being, and that friendships are possible, regardless of a person's disability.

MAKE CONNECTIONS TO FAMILIAR PEERS

An important way for coaches to facilitate connections is to recognize who the student already knows on campus, and to consider how those casual acquaintances can be strengthened and deepened. For example, some students receive support from a classmate for note-taking, or have been connected to work on group projects by the instructor. Although those roles are different from being friends, coaches have opportunities to facilitate friendships through these experiences by encouraging the student to invite classmates to connect outside of class.

In another case, some students may recognize other people on campus who went to their high school. Coaches have an opportunity to capitalize on these connections by suggesting to the student that they invite this classmate to meet up for lunch or simply hang out at the campus cafeteria. Just spending time together at the cafeteria can lead to meeting each other's friends, thus widening both students' social network.

CONNECT STUDENTS THROUGH INTERESTS

Another way students get to know others is through shared interests. For instance, a student may have a talent using technology to create presentations or to find information on the college



Inclusive Dual Enrollment Student Support for College Success

The Student Support for College Success Grab and Go series summarizes best practices for coaches and mentors who support dually enrolled students with intellectual disability on college campuses. A checklist for educational coaches is included.

app. Less tech-savvy students may benefit from this expertise and appreciate learning from a college peer. This could then lead to increased time spent together as they get to know each other.

Similarly, a student who likes radio production may enjoy being at the campus radio station with other students who share the same passion.

Finding out a student's interests can be accomplished by asking them directly, or by checking with others such as family, teachers, and friends.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF STUDENT ACTIVITIES AND CLUBS

Teaching students how to pursue interests is a great way to make friends. Coaches can help students find time in their schedules to visit the student activities office to get a calendar of events and a list of clubs available on campus. Encouraging students to attend a campus club expo at the beginning of the semester is a perfect opportunity for students to explore the variety of club offerings. Remember, though, that going once to a club meeting will not provide enough time to make a friend. Coaches can help students build time into their weekly schedule to attend club events regularly, thereby providing maximum opportunities for students to get to know each other. Similarly, identifying volunteer opportunities on or off campus where students work together toward a common goal can foster social connections. Finally, encouraging students to work out at the campus athletic center is a natural way for them to make friends. Going to the gym on a regular basis at the same time and on the same days is going to increase the chances that they will see and become familiar with the same people exercising.



USE TECHNOLOGY

Technology plays a big part in how college students communicate, including the use of social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) as well as texting. Providing students with instructions on how to use these formats may enhance their opportunities for connecting with peers. Coaches may also find it helpful to send reminder texts about meet-up times for club activities as well as prompting students to use or refer to calendar apps. Helping students become confident with technology can expand their social network. Coaches should remind students to use social media responsibly, a fact that is usually emphasized on all campuses.



KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING ON CAMPUS

It's important for students to know their way around campus, but it's also important for coaches to recognize where the popular spots are. Classrooms and cafeterias are prime places to make connections, but there are other "hot spots" where social connections can be made. These include open campus courtyards where students toss Frisbees between classes, or common green space in between buildings where students gather for spontaneous coffee breaks.



ENCOURAGE PEER MENTOR CONNECTIONS

Promoting independence through peer mentors creates opportunities to develop connections between students and their peers. Peer mentors are great at letting students know about upcoming social opportunities on campus. They can also be a natural support at concerts, athletic events, and campus parties. Friendships often develop when students get to know each other and enjoy their time together.

Peer mentors who live on campus provide even more opportunities for students with disabilities to experience typical social interactions, such as hanging in the common rooms of the residence halls where students may cook, watch sports, or play video games. Many peer mentors have been responsible for designing and organizing inclusive campus-wide events like social groups, holiday dances, or bake sales.



GETTING OUT OF THE WAY OF FRIENDSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The level of support coaches provide to encourage friendships and social connections will vary by the needs of the student and by the situation. The following are tips for supporting students without getting in their way.



Tip #1. Remember, just your physical presence speaks volumes. It's important to seriously consider how much support is needed, and offer it in the least obtrusive way possible.

Tip #2. Use the time you are providing support to model social skills, such as extending a greeting, introducing someone, and initiating or ending a conversation. Make sure you do not stand in the way of the student initiating these exchanges.

Tip #3. If the student is fully engaged and is doing well, step aside and let them engage on their own, but watch and learn. You may learn some techniques and strategies from them that you can share with others.

Tip #4. Keep in touch with a student to offer encouragement and support as needed. Guidance can be important, especially if the student hasn't had previous experience making decisions about attending college events that might impact their schedule or finances.

Tip #5. Remember that some students might need support to understand personal and social boundaries, as well as to navigate social situations on their own.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON FRIENDSHIP

To support someone with a disability in making and keeping friends, it's important to have an expectation of success. You'll also need to show clarity of purpose and flexibility, and model good social interactions. Defining expectations and boundaries, as well as encouraging students to express and share their interests with others will help start the process of making friends. Not only will the student reap the benefits of friendship, but so will their friend.

Checking in: Are you supporting students to . . .

1. Create a list of contacts on their phone or in their planner?
2. Identify peers who share the same interests?
3. Invite a classmate to lunch?
4. Get a list of clubs from the student activities center?
5. Join/follow Facebook or other social media groups?
6. Work out a way with their families to attend campus events on nights and weekends?

 **ThinkCollege**
TRANSITION PROJECT



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