



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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MAKE CONNECTIONS! BONDING FRESHMEN, STUDENT TO STUDENT

I *hate* losing students! At graduation I comfort myself that my students are halfway to reaching their goals, that some have reached them, and that many will come back to visit. But when one drops out or stops out, giving up that dream he came to college with, I *really, really hate it!* Almost all of them could have made it if they'd hung in there, stayed the course—but somehow we weren't able to convince them to do that. Too often, they write us off as "being nice," as being authority figures who cannot possibly understand what they are up against. Their own fears deafen them to what instructors, counselors, and administrators tell them about staying and succeeding.

For years the retention problem worried me. And then one morning, quite literally, I woke up with a plan. It was simple, it was based on my knowledge of the character of our student body, it was stunningly cost-effective (read that as "cheap"), and I knew it could work.

Well, seven years later, with the help and support of coworkers, key administrators, and the steadily growing support of the *entire* faculty, the program has flourished, expanded, and best of all, helped keep hundreds of students around to achieve their goals. It has become the official mentoring program of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC): we call it *Connections*.

Essentially, *Connections* pairs second-year students with new students as mentors, one to one. They provide peer support throughout our new students' first semester and sometimes throughout the entire first year.

Our objectives include linking new students to administration, faculty, staff, student services, and school policy via our mentors; buffering new students from feelings of isolation while facing new demands in this new environment; offering "survival" aids through peer wisdom, advice, company, and encouragement in social and academic areas; reflecting the "family feeling" and a sense of "community"; and creating a

powerful tool to use in future recruiting and retention campaigns.

Along with these objectives, there are features tailored to our busy, largely nontraditional student body. This program is a service to the college; it is not a club, society, or fraternal group. Consequently, there are no formal meetings, officers, dues, fundraisers, or additional stress on students who rush from school to jobs to children and have little time and money to spare. The program is not an academic tutoring service; however, mentors do give study tips, take the students they mentor to the Learning Lab, and pass on the wisdom experience has garnered. It does not match mentors and mentees—our student body is diverse in regard to age, stage, and flavor; and new students will be surrounded by others of every background in their classes. It does not set up an artificial relationship, but rather, it tries to facilitate a new student's adjustment to MGCCC's environment. And finally, while contact between mentors and mentees must be regular and frequent, each pair is responsible for choosing the meeting places and times most convenient for them both.

The success of the program rests squarely on the quality of the mentors. The requirements are few. Prospective mentors must have been enrolled, full- or part-time, for one regular college year; must be in good standing academically; and must have exhibited empathy for fellow students and a supportive, positive nature. Most mentors are nominated by their instructors during the spring semester to serve the following year; they are then invited to join, although some have volunteered and/or been mentees in the program before. All are interviewed by the sponsor(s) and given an orientation and the *Connections Mentor Handbook*. They serve by the semester and may stay in or leave the program at the end of that time. They understand that they are their new students' cheerleaders and number one supporters, and they take their responsibilities seriously and enhance them enthusiastically. Mentors keep informal journals of their experiences, which they submit at the end of the semester along with a program evaluation and suggestions for changes.



“New” students include entering freshmen, transfers, and former students returning after an absence of more than five years. Whether they sign up for *Connections* as high school seniors in the spring before they enroll, at early registration sessions for new students during the summer, or at walk-in registrations during the fall and winter, new students are assigned mentors immediately, with the promise that they will hear from them in two to five days. At the end of their first semester, mentees complete a program evaluation and suggestion sheet, and decide whether or not to request a mentor for the second semester.

Sponsors are the glue that holds this program together. They promote the program to administration, faculty, and the community—building support. They interview, train, and serve as general counselors to the mentors. Mentors regularly communicate with the sponsors on the progress of the mentees and report any challenges to this progress to the sponsors immediately. Sponsors and mentors together make a plan to deal with the challenges, using available college resources. The sponsors also keep careful records and retention data for the program, ultimately to be shared with the administration. In addition, sponsors may make adjustments to *Connections*’ flexible structure in order to fit the needs of the three MGCCC individual campuses and reflect the suggestions of the mentors and mentees.

So how has *Connections* flourished, expanded, and retained new students over the years? It began as a pilot program on my campus in fall 1997, with 30 mentors, primarily recruited from among students my cosponsor and I knew, supplemented with several recommendations by some other members of the faculty. There was an equal number of new students, most of them recruited on Club Day in the early fall. By year’s end, we had 61 mentors and 65 new students. Over the years, we have had 550 mentors (they seldom stop after one semester, becoming addicted to helping others) serving 789 new students. In fall 2002, *Connections* spread from my campus to our second largest, where it continues to grow. Finally, fall 2003, the program began for the first time in a dormitory environment on our smallest and most traditional campus. Thus, *Connections* had established itself as the official mentoring program for the college as a whole.

Most importantly, *Connections* keeps students succeeding through that vital first year and enrolling as sophomores. In the program’s first year, the campus retention rate was 65%, but 82% in *Connections*. The lowest retention rate ever recorded was 79% (several years ago); the highest was 91%, far surpassing both the campus and college rates for freshmen re-enrolling as

sophomores.

The greatest surprise has been the effect on our mentors. Not only do they remain in the program in great numbers, the part-timers sometimes for years, with no reward except a certificate of appreciation and a letter of commendation, they thank us for allowing them the opportunity to give their precious time and compassion to help other students! Can you believe it? And *that* makes me *very, very happy, indeed!*

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